NGE: Nobody Dies

Story: NGE: Nobody Dies

Storylink: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/5579457/1/

Category: Evangelion

Genre: Drama/Humor

Author: Gregg Landsman

Authorlink: https://www.fanfiction.net/u/6729/

Last updated: 02/22/2012

Words: 596438

Rating: T

Status: In Progress

Content: Chapter 1 to 110 of 110 chapters

Source: FanFiction.net

Summary: What would happen if we had everything we ever wanted? What if certain tragedies, in the past, were averted? One would normally think this would make a better world. Some old traumas could be gone. But the new pains could be worse.

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

"*Prepping for second stage. Initiating LCL ionization. Setting plug depth.*"

Gripping the controls. Breathe in. Breathe out. This is for the best. The entire future rides on the results of this experiment. Science is the future, after all. Sacrifices have to be made for it.

"*Second stage successful. Plug depth set. Preparing third stage activation.*"

They will understand, when that glorious future is laid out before them. They will praise and sing her name when she hands them paradise. They will love her and worship her, and everything will be right with the world.

A nervous tick crosses her lip. Tapping a button on her wrist, she brings up the video screen in her right eye. Her husband, her son. The Professor, that poor sweet man. Watching as the experiment readies, and…and her son.

Her son is smiling, watching Mommy get ready to pilot the giant robot.

Ready to get nice and traumatized from watching Mommy die.

"*Ready for third stage activation in three…two…*"

"Abort!"

She pulls her hands from the controls as if they burn her, flipping open a control panel between her legs and pulling up a lever. The entire plug shakes, LCL draining from it like water down a toilet as it jerks and spins out of the monster's spine.

Undoing the belts across her chest and waist, she scrambles out of her chair and climbs out, climbing to the hatch and pushing it open.

The boots of the plug suit clang against the metal catwalk as she practically jumps out of the metal tube, not affording the restrained monster a glance as she grabs a towel from a technician and dries off her short brown hair, pushing open the door to the Control Box as everyone stares. Waiting a moment, she hands the now damp and sticky towel to another technician, who stares at it before walking off with it. Her baby runs over, leaping into her arms as she gives off a relieved smile.

"What happened?" Kozou asks.

"The experiment's too dangerous," Yui responds, "We're looking into something else. I'll get on the horn with Kihl and go over everything with him."

Her husband raises an eyebrow, turning to Kozou. He shrugs, turning back to her as he scratches the back of his head.

"Yui," he starts.

"No," Yui cuts him off, "There was a better than likely chance that-"

Rudely jerks her thumb at the restrained biomech.

"Was going to *eat me.* I have an idea for an alternative that will still get that thing working. Until then, we're not having any contact experiments. Clear?"

Kozou and Gendo both nod, both sighing. The technicians hide their snickers. There is little illusion of who wears the pants in the Ikari household, and it is mainly because it is *easy* to stay on Doctor Yui Ikari's good side that harmony rules GEHRIN with an *iron fist.*

"Now, come on," she says, tightening her grip on her son, "Let's find whatever hole Naoko's stuck herself into and get back to work."

-

-

Neon Genesis Evangelion:

Nobody Dies

-

-

"*Due to special emergency circumstances, all lines are currently out of service. Thank you.*"

AD 2017. T+ 17 years, Second Impact.

He stares at the receiver for a few moments before sighing and placing it back on the phone. Reaching into his pocket, he flips open the phone and, again, stares. No signal. Sighing, he closes it, spinning

around. Getting his bearings. Figuring out *what the Hell he's going to do.*

The city is empty.

He arrived here two hours ago and he hasn't seen a single blessed soul.

It's a nice city, mind you. Sure, no buildings are taller than the apartment blocks, but it is a nice city, if low key and suburban. The streets are clean, there is not traffic (partially because no cars are moving) and the buildings are nice and colorful.

But still, there are no people.

"Come," he says, scratching his head, "Just…'come.' I haven't seen him in three years and that's all I get?"

The sixteen year old boy, with dark brown hair and clear blue eyes, dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans from the four hour train ride, scratches his head as if he can dig through his skull to find an answer. A nervous habit, yes, but considering his heritage most find it lucky he isn't hanging from a light fixture and babbling.

Despite being well into puberty and priding himself that he is, in fact, male, he shrieks like a schoolgirl when an explosion rips through a building several blocks down, scrambling back as a VTOL jet flies overhead, the four engines on its cigar-shaped body blasting out superheated air as a volley of missiles swarms out.

"What the *Hell?*" he asks, mouth hanging open.

A statement he repeats even louder when a line of pink light lances through the air and the VTOL explodes in a plume of ignited fuel.

The entire apartment block collapses as some*thing* rises above it, a great and mighty *foot* crushing it under its weight. As it is, Shinji Ikari's brain rewires itself at a great and mighty speed, the flight mechanism suppressing the fight response to the point where it barely notices it existed, and the rest of his brain reinforcing the bladder control so he doesn't soil his pants.

It stands over twenty stories tall.

Its skin is the color of limes and sour apples. Its body is some sort of sick parody of the human form, with elongated arms covered in bone

spikes, ending in three fingered hands. Its legs are thin and boney and should in no way hold up that *thing* in front of him and *it doesn't even have a head* just a lump fused with its shoulders where some sort of bird skull is looking at him.

And it's looking at him.

It is looking at him.

"Oh…shit," he whispers.

The left hand snaps open and it turns on him, reaching for him. The hole at the center of its hand begins to glow as the air whine and pulses, cars flying towards the monster as it looks up.

"*Fox 2!*"

And a missile fires out, whipping past Shinji before slamming into the red core at its center. The missile explodes, the creature falling back, emitting a sound between bad violin, dying cats and cricket sex as it grabs at its chest, a hairline fracture where the explosive hit.

"Shinji Ikari?"

A spent green tube- a missile launcher- lands at his feet. A hand grabs his arm as he dumbly nods.

"Great. Come with me if you want to live."

With a yank, the wind whips past him as he's carried along, his feet leaving the ground as the entirety of Tokyo-3 becomes a blur. Save for the green thing. That is clearly visible and it is currently stomping after them. Even though it is incapable of expressions and its face has not even changed position, he knows that it is *pissed off*.

"Yeah, it's me," the rescuer says, "I've got him. Oh, and the Angel is after him to. We're going to need a distraction…"

A click of the tongue and a sigh.

"Yeah, I took down its field and hit it in the core with an RPG. Okay, okay, *I* pissed it off. Happy?"

They run up the side of an apartment block, vaulting the rooftops, speeding along faster than a car as lime green feet stomp the street in their wake, narrowly dodging as blasts of pink light rip up buildings.

"Hey, are you afraid of heights?"

He nods with a whimper.

"Too bad."

Which is when Shinji turns around and stares at the end of the apartment building. The ground leaves, or at least the rooftop ends, and Shinji takes a moment to stare at a quarter mile drop between them, the edge of this district of the city, and the one it overlooks over a sheer concrete wall.

"Oh…oh God," he whispers.

They drop. The rescuer, who is apparently determined to get him killed, laughs. Below them, a plate of concrete and metal slides open and reveals a metal tube, his rescuer twisting and slipping them both in, Shinji's side hitting cushions that take the brunt of the impact before he bounces off onto polished smooth metal.

He screams, she laughs, as they ride the tube at full speed like a spiral slide, a pair of hands grabbing the metal. He shoots ahead of her, bouncing through the turns, eyes going wide as he sees the light at the end of the tunnel.

A light which is an actual exit, which he shoots out of before slamming into a wall covered in gel padding. He hangs off it for a moment, all his forward inertia rippling through it before he drops to the cold metal floor.

"*Incoming!*"

A white and blue blur slams foot first into the gel, kicking off of it before flipping and landing on two sneaker covered feet. His eyes slowly, shakily, trace up. Past the white sneakers and black socks. Past the pale white legs and plaid skirt, past the white shirt, blue jacket, finally towards the face framed in blue hair and sporting a pair of red, blood colored eyes.

Arms shoot up and she bows, and right before his brain begins shutting *because this can't be f__ing happening* down he hears something about a '10-point landing.'

"Rei!"

She spins around, clapping her hands together as heels slap against

the metal floor.

"Dr. Akagi," the girl squeals, "One Third Child, as ordered!"

He rolls onto his back, not on his own will. Looking down on him is a woman. A beautiful, adult woman with glasses and chocolate brown hair, in a wet suit and a lab coat. He wants to believe he is dreaming, but the pounding of his heart is telling him that no, no, this is *really really* real.

"Hello, Shinji," she says, "I am Ritsuko Akagi. I am a friend of your father's."

"In a Ugandan way," Rei adds.

"Rei, be quiet," Ritsuko says, glaring at her before turning back to Shinji, "Shinji, you were summoned here by your father. You're in a facility called NERV-1. That creature that attacked you and Rei… right."

She tilts his head up. The pale girl smiles and waves, clicking her heels together with a high pitched giggle.

"This is Rei Ayanami," Ritsuko continues, "She is a Pilot. Like you. Do you know why you were summoned to Tokyo-3?"

He shakes his head. Eyes dart around as others begin approaching. A young woman with purple hair, in a black dress and bomber jacket. A girl a little older than him with short black hair and in a beige uniform.

"Well, that creature that attacked you is an Angel," Ritsuko says, "And…we need you to destroy it."

A pause, a beat. Rei stares at Ritsuko, pursing her lips.

"Any questions?"

His response does not come in the form of a question. Rather, as would be sensible for someone in his position and from his recent experience, his response comes in the form of a scream.

It starts all the way in his stomach, streaking up his throat and exiting his mouth in a high pitched, sustained shriek of terror, disbelief and girlish horror, before he scrambles onto his feet and runs. Skidding the corner, he sprints on all fours into the nearest labeled men's rest room,

rolling to a stop in a stall and locking the door behind him.

Back in the hallway, the assembled personnel can only stare and watch. Leaning back on her feet, Rei shrugs and starts walking towards the bathroom.

"I'll drag him out," she says, "Someone should call the Commander."

*

*

He found a bag in the stall, most likely for stool samples, but since it was brown and paper it would serve for the current purpose. Fist closed around the opening, the bag inflates and deflates with every hard, ragged breath. Shinji Ikari, child of two of the smarted people on the face of the Earth, hyperventilates in a men's room stall several miles underground as his brain slowly restarts.

It has been years since he saw any relatives outside of his uncle and aunt. Of course, they are busy. They are *always* busy. That's the *point*. As it is, he is an afterthought, or so he tells himself, and he still has no idea what in *God's name* they do.

The bag deflates and inflates. His toes curl inside his short boots, his knuckles white around the bag. He has to go out there at some point, he tells himself. Eventually. Maybe sometime next week when he stops telling himself that a lime green monster that takes on armies just tried to make him its prison bitch.

"Heeee~ey," the voice calls out, the door to the bathroom swinging open, "Oh, Shin~ji? Are you dead yet?"

White sneakers and black socks he can see underneath the teal stall door. They shift from side to side, a small, light knock on the door. Another knock, followed by a sigh and the sound of knuckles cracking.

Then the pale fist puts a hole through the door, reaching all the way to her short sleeve. The hand gropes at the door before finally settling on the lock, turning it to open before retracting. The bag ceases its inflating as Shinji stops breathing, staring in mute horror as Rei places her hands on her knees and bends down, smiling.

"Hey there," she says, "I know this is freaking you out, but the Commander, your *dad,* really wants to see you right now. I can carry

you if you'd like. 'Kay?"

The bag inflates slowly, then slowly sucks back in. Carefully, he lowers it, finding he is not blinking as much as he should.

"What…*are*…you?" he asks.

"I'm Rei," she says with a toothy grin.

"No…no, what *are* you?"

"I said it before, silly," she says, "I'm Rei."

She grabs his arm, yanking him to his feet, and drags him out.

*

*

"Yeah, this is a great idea. Let's start him out by introducing him to *Rei.*"

The purple haired woman glares at Ritsuko as they walk across the catwalk, Akagi rubbing the bridge of her nose as lights come on over the artificial lake.

"Don't ask me," she says, "The Commander ordered Rei to rendezvous with him. If it were up to me, I would've sent you, Misato. Right now we can hope that Rei hasn't scared him off."

"Oh, like she'd let him *run,*" Misato Katsuragi says with a snort, stopping and tapping her foot, "She'd break his legs, first. Something is *not right* with that girl."

"Thank you, Professor."

"*Is something wrong?*"

Both women freeze. They both turn to the lit platform at the top of the holding facility, the man silhouetted by the back light. He pushes his amber glasses up his nose as Akagi slides hers back on.

"We think Rei has made a bad first impression on the Third Child," Misato says.

"I see."

"From what Section 2 tells us," Akagi continues, "Rei…agitated…the Fourth Angel, then had it chase her and Shinji across District 14 before they…they free fell into access port 4. Last I checked, Shinji was hyperventilating in a bathroom on floor B21."

Thanks to the back lighting, they cannot read the expression on his face.

"Sorry we're late!"

At this point, Shinji's color is lighter than Rei's. He walks, half stumbling, onto the catwalk as Misato and Ritsuko turn and stare at the girl, who comes to a stop as Shinji stumbles a few steps more before himself halting. Rubbing the bridge of her nose, sighing in exasperation, Akagi pushes her glasses back up and gestures to Misato.

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Misato Katsuragi," she says, "She is the tactical operations commander for NERV-1. Shinji, the Fourth Angel will attempt to penetrate the major layers of armor we have surrounding our base in order to initiate an event which will more or less end all sentient life on this planet. We believe you can stop it."

Looking from side to side, he taps his foot and waits. Waits for the laugh track to begin. Walking past them, he turns and stares at the backlit platform.

"Father?"

"Hello, Shinji," Commander Gendo Ikari says, "It has been a while."

"Three years," he says, "And I just get a postcard. Can you please tell me that this is a joke?"

"No joke," a second voice says, a door on the other side of the catwalk opening.

Flat shoes hit the catwalk, wearing a sweat suit and lab coat, glasses on her face and her shoulder length brown hair sporting some traces of gray.

"Mom?" Shinji asks.

"It's been four years for me," Yui Ikari says, placing her hands on Shinji's shoulders and squeezing, "Your uncle and aunt has sent us updates, but it's been too long. How are you?"

"Tired, freaked out, and I think I wet myself," he says with a shaky smile, "Um…can someone please tell me what's going on here?"

The spotlights underneath the lake and against the wall fire up. Slowly, he turns, his eyes first wandering onto the massive yellow optics, then expanding out. Out onto the purple metal, the green highlights. His eyes trace along the horn jutting from its nose, the demonic grin covering its face.

That is what it looks like, he thinks, like some sort of mythological Oni. Like a demonic mask used to scare children into sleeping.

"What is that?" he asks.

"Evangelion Unit 01," Gendo Ikari responds, "The single most advanced combat unit ever created by human hands."

Disengaging from his mother, he wants to the side catwalk, staring at it. With a discharge of steam and rush of air, the visage of the massive cyborg turns to him.

"And it has chosen *you* as its pilot," Yui adds.

Eyes roll up, and Shinji collapses in a heap to the floor.

*

*

A sharp intake of breath and eyes open, darting from side to side as he sits up in the hospital bed. He coughs, scrambling out of the bed, sprinting on all fours into the white tiled bathroom before jettisoning the contents of the last two days worth of meals into the toilet. Coughing, gagging, he hits the flush control, letting it spin down before he releases the rest. Just to be sure.

"I see you're up."

The voice comes from the room, and he stumbles out, looking down and seeing he's in a hospital gown. Groaning, he looks across the room to find Misato waving, a cheery expression on her face as she leans against the door.

"Hey," she says, "You alright?"

He taps the side of his head, raising an eyebrow.

"I…guess," he says, "I guess. What happened?"

"You blacked out," she responds, After we recovered the plug. How are you feeling?"

"Like I just had my head stomped on."

"Accurate," Misato says with a shrug, watching him flip down onto the bed, "Good work, though. You did well."

He clenches his eyes shut, groaning.

LCL pressure set. Synchronization at...54%! Oo, Unit 01 LIKES him!

"Ng…I remember getting in the plug," he says, "I remember you launching it. I remember trying to fight the thing…"

"The Angel put your head through a building," Misato says, sitting on the chair next to him, "Whatever the Eva feels, you do. That's how synchronization works. You have an unusually high synch ratio, so you definitely felt that."

"Uh huh," he says, scrunching his forehead, "I…I remember screaming. It broke my arm?"

"The Eva's arm," she says, holding up his right arm so he sees that it is, in fact, intact, "Not yours."

"Right…right…and then…"

Roaring. Screaming. Shrieking. Screaming.

KILL.

The fist goes through the Angel's face, coming out the other side, the Eva grabbing both shoulders and tearing down the middle. It shrieks, screaming as its body is ripped down to the waist, the Core hanging on the thinnest skeletal strings before the jaw opens and comes down on-

"It…went berserk," Misato says, patting his shoulder, "The Angel's gone, Shinji. It's dead. You don't have to worry about it, anymore. It's *gone.*"

"I…I remember that," he says, "I didn't black out from that. I blacked out later. I calmed it down and I saw something in the rubble and…"

*

*

"Okay, the Angel's gone," Misato's voice says in his ear, "Prepare to power down and be retrieved."

"Wait," Shinji says, willing the Eva's head to turn as he grips the controls, "I…wait, I see something! Can this thing see through buildings?"

The view of Tokyo-3 shifts. It becomes wire framed, pulsing, individual shapes appearing in buildings as he nods. Willing it forward, he turns towards a building, the one the Angel slammed his head through.

"Oh…oh no," he says, "Ma'am, there's someone trapped in that building!"

The Eva's arm, the good arm, tears open the building, a convenience store and apartment complex. Growling, he opens the hatch between his legs, pulling the level as the Plug violently jerks back and up.

"Shinji, what are you doing?" Yui's voice asks.

"There's someone trapped in there!" he yells, popping open restraints, "I'll be right back!"

Ignoring the protests, he climbs out, swallowing, hard as he sees he is still at least fifty feet up, despite the Eva being bent down on one knee. Grabbing armor plating, he slowly crawls down the arm, holding on for dear life as he shimmies down the index finger.

Running into the store, he pulls aside rubble, working his way in. Slowly, laboriously, as he hears the shaky breathing as sirens blare in the distance.

Before finally coming to the source, the little girl with brown hair, and the half ton slab of concrete and metal on her legs.

*

*

"You blacked out after you got the emergency crews to her," Misato says, softly, squeezing his shoulder, "I…I'll get you what I can on her. When we know she'll make it."

"I did that," he says.

"No, the Angel did," she says with a sigh, "Look, Shinji. Give me a

couple of hours. Then we'll get out of here. Okay?"

He turns to her, raising an eyebrow.

"Your parents are both insanely busy," she says, "So they can't take care of you. Your father's the Commander, your mother heads the entire research department. So, they made me a deal. I take care of you while you're here. Alright?"

"I…guess."

"And enthusiastic you are," she says with a chuckle, slapping him on the back, "Look, you did good. Your mother wanted me to tell you she's proud of you. Your father…well, you know. You did great out there, especially for a first timer. So, you'll be fine, alright?"

"…alright."

She grins, patting him on the head, and walks out. Slowly, hesitantly, he lies back onto the bed. Staring at the unfamiliar ceiling, he sighs.

Silently, fitfully, drifts off into sleep.

Chapter 2: The City of Lost Children

The light streams in through the window, hitting the eyes of the bedroom's occupant as she gives off a yawn, followed by bracing her hands on the bed and flipping out of the covers. Landing on the balls of her feet, her pajamas billowing as she gives off a brief twirl, she stretches her arms above her head and leaps over to her closet.

School uniform in hand, she hangs it on the hook of her bedroom door, skipping to the laptop computer set up by her bed and clicking open her email server.

Oh, good, Rei Ayanami, First Child thinks, She got my message.

Folding her legs under her, manic smile on her face, she begins perusing the email, grinning the entire way. Well, she does have to get going, soon enough. It's Shinji's first day at school.

But what could possibly go wrong?

-

-

Chapter 2: City of Lost Children

-

-

The open hand slap hits him hard enough to send him off his feet. His shoulder hits the grass first, followed by the rest of him, and Shinji groans. The groan comes from two sources; because his face is burning, and because he has landed on his keys.

Half expecting the slap to be followed by kicks to the ribs, he rolls onto his back and props himself up on his elbows. His salvation comes in the form of another student, dressed in a black, green piped track suit instead of the slacks and shirt school uniform, which is holding the aggressor by the waist as she kicks and screams.

It started innocently enough. The girl, who he will admit is cute in her own way, with her dark pigtails and air of assumed if not actual authority, had asked to talk with him once he let it slip he was the new pilot.

"You *STUPID BASTARD!*" Hikari Horaki, class representative of Class 4-A at Tokyo-3 municipal high school, screams, one shoe barely missing his head as she continues kicking, "What do you mean *YOU DIDN'T SEE HER?!*"

"Calm down!" the boy yells, "Geez, Class Rep! Calm down!"

Off to the side, the glasses-wearing boy watches in mute horror, his camcorder forgotten in his hand.

"He saved her life!"

"After he *STEPPED ON HER!"*

Shinji scrambles to his feet. The situation begins to dawn, begins to come together. Hands on his knees, wheezing, he looks up, to explain. Which is when a pale hand comes down on his shoulder, and he looks up into the deep red eyes.

"Hey," Rei says with a smile, "What'd I miss?"

Hikari stops struggling, freezing, as the camcorder drops to the ground.

"Oh, goodie," Rei says, folding her hands at her waist, "My coworker has made his first friends! Shinji, this is Hikari. The guy restraining her is Touji, and the kid looking at my boobs is Kensuke. Say hi, everyone."

Three mumbled greetings.

"So," Rei says, "Why's my coworker been assaulted?"

Three sets of sputtering responses, until Touji lets the girl down, scratching the back of his head.

"Uh…Hikari's little sister was injured," Touji says, "When the monster put the robot's head through a building, she got hurt."

"I'm really sorry," Rei says, shushing Shinji with a look, "But, we all know that the Angel did it, not Shinji. If the Angel was still around for you to beat up…well, if the Angel was still around, we'd all be dead. So I'm gonna have to very nicely ask that you not touch my coworker."

She smiles, teeth showing.

"'Kay?"

Shinji, at this point, has never been more scared in his *life.*

"I'm gonna go back inside," Rei says, patting Shinji on the shoulder, "You three play nice, 'Kay?"

She walks past them, whistling out of tune. Silently, averting his gaze, Hikari walks back in, followed by Kensuke. Thrusting his hands in his pockets, Touji groans.

"Look," he says, "For what it's worth…sorry. If you didn't dig her out, she woulda died and…so, yeah. Sorry."

He turns and walks back in, yelling for them to wait. Groaning, he finally falls onto his seat on the grass. Holding his head, hands behind his head, he puts his head between his knees and silently, mercilessly, swears.

"…damn it…"

*

*

Twelve black monoliths glow in the darkness. Standing at the center, in the spotlight, clad in a red sweater and black skirt and labcoat, Yui Ikari pushes her glasses up and smirks. The years have been kind to her. Pushing forty, she still resembles a woman in her prime.

"The destruction of the Fourth Angel has been accomplished," 02 intones, "Even with the modifications to the Divine Technology. You have accomplished that which you promised, Doctor Ikari."

"As I said I would," Yui responds, "The Synthesis has proven to be an alternative to our initial methods of activating the Evangelions, and the problems initially dealt with only pushed the timeline back two years. So, it is time to move to the next phase."

"Which would be?" 01 asks.

"Should the Angels concentrate their attacks on Tokyo-3," she says, "I request that Unit 02, as well as its pilot and creator, be transferred to Tokyo-3. I will repeat this request when the Fifth Angel has been dealt with, so we can be certain that *we* are their focus."

"It shall be considered," 01 responds, "Prove to us it is logical and it

shall be done. What is the status of the Evangelions?"

Folding her arms underneath her busom, she grins.

"Unit 00 will be combat ready in one month," she says, "Unit 01 sustained minimal damage and will require only a week's repair. Rei has also progressed, and has displayed more extranormal abilities."

"Understood," 06 says, "And the others?"

"The others will be ready within six months," she says, "The new scenario progresses as promised. Now, if the Committee will excuse me, I have not seen my son in four years. I believe the lull we have is an appropriate time to catch up."

The others disappear, save for 01, which itself turns into an old man in a visor and black robes.

"It is fortunate you are still with us, Doctor," Lorenz Kihl says, "But do not forget. We shall not."

"Of course not, Kihl," she says with a smirk, "Mankind has no time left."

And the hologram disappears.

*

*

He made it a point to avoid everyone's gaze. Especially the Class Representative's, studiously typing away as the teacher, an old man who he is surprised is moving under his own power, drones on about Second Impact. Still, his thoughts wander. The girl. The girl he saved. The girl he saved after he almost killed her through his own *incompetence.*

"Excuse me?"

Looking up, he sees that the classroom is empty, and the sun has reached its zenith outside. Lunch time.

Looking up, past his computer, he sees her. She is smiling, shakily, unsure of her own smile. Her hands are clasped at her waist and she is waiting for him to respond.

"Going for the other cheek?" he asks.

"No," Hikari says, "I…I wanted to apologize."

"…okay," he says.

"It was wrong of me to blame you for what happened to Nozomi," she says, "My sister. Her name is Nozomi. I shouldn't blame you for that."

"Okay," he says, closing his computer.

"And since you saved us by piloting," she continues, "I should not have reacted like I did. Okay?"

He sighs, nodding.

"Well?" she asks.

"Rei put you up to this?" he asks, smirking slightly when she freezes up, "Look, since I came, here, I've almost died three times, once because of her. I understand if she scared you into doing this. She scares me, to."

She sighs, pulling up a chair and sitting down in it. Hands twisting in her lap, she lowers her head, clenching her eyes shut. He sighs, mentally kicking himself once more as he has frequently this day.

"Sorry," he says, "I'm sorry I said that. Are you alright?"

"…I guess," she says, "I…just haven't heard from the doctors about her, yet. So…so we're all really worried. She's only ten years old and…"

"I see you've already made a friend."

The two turn, Hikari wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Yui smiles, walking into the classroom, giving it an appraising look before she turns back to her son.

"Hikari," Yui says, "How are you?"

"I'm…I'm fine, Doctor Ikari," she responds, "I…should go."

A small look passes between the two. Shinji clears his throat, standing up.

"Mom," he says, "I wanted to know if I could ask about something."

Yui nods, folding her arms as Hikari stands up to excuse herself.

"That girl who was injured," Shinji says, "Could you find out what happened to her?"

"That wasn't your fault," Yui says.

"Please," Shinji says, "We just want to know."

Yui sighs, running a hand through her hair. Pushing her glasses back up her nose, she takes out a PDA and flips through messages and text, tracing her finger on the touch screen and nodding as she centers on a particular report.

"Oh, I see," she says with a grin, turning to Hikari, "Your sister?"

Hikari nods, quickly.

"Well, the bad news," Yui says, "She broke her left leg and her right foot, and bruised three ribs. The good news is that there wasn't any real blood loss or lasting damage. The doctors were going to call you this afternoon, but you can take this home now, if you want. She'll be released next week, and the doctors tell me she'll be back to normal in…"

She taps a display, sending an order.

"Three months. Since it was a NERV operation, NERV is covering the cost. Okay?"

Hikari nods, a smile parting her face. Hands clasped as a relieved smile gives way to an equally relieved laugh, and hesitating for a second, she hugs Shinji. His eyes go wide and his face goes beat red before she quickly pulls back, mutters an apology, and turns back to the smiling Dr. Ikari.

"Now, run along," Yui says, "I'm taking my son out to lunch."

Nodding, she does, breaking into a sprint when she reaches the hall.

"Damn it," he mutters.

"What?" she asks, and narrows her eyes, grabbing his chin and looking at his cheek, "Who did this to you?"

"She did," he sighs, "It's my fault. I blew my cover and her sister was hurt. I deserved it."

She sighs, placing her hands on his shoulders.

"I know," he says, "I know it's not my fault. Everyone's telling me that…that doesn't mean it's *true*."

He shrugs her off, walking towards the exit.

"Let's go."

*

*

He picks at the pasta. Not looking her in the eye, brow furrowed and the most getting out of him a series of grunts and acknowledgements. Considering they have not seen each other in four years, it is perfectly possible he has gone mute, but she's thinking that isn't particularly likely.

Poor boy, Yui thinks, So young, but has to do so much.

"I think Hikari likes you," she says, "She wouldn't have apologized if she didn't. She's a…friend of Rei's."

They sit at a bistro near the school, and Yui considers it her privilidge to pull her son out of school for a long overdue day out. People file in and out, and the glass of wine is half drained while his tea is barely touched.

"So, Dad's busy?" he asks.

"Of course he is," she says, "It was me or him, and you know your father. He's distant at best. You know he loves you, he just isn't good at showing that love."

He grunts in response.

"I know this is hard," she says, "But for the next few weeks, we're going to be asking a lot of you. Unit 00 won't be ready for a few weeks, so if another Angel attacks, we'll need you to pilot Unit 01."

Another grunt. She sighs, adjusting her glasses. Calling up her PDA, she clicks up a file, smiling as she turns back to him.

"Thankfully, you're not going to be the only one," Yui says, picking at her salad as people stream by, "Unit 02's pilot will be here soon

enough. You might get along with him. He's a…strange boy, little odd. Dr. Sohryu will come along with him, probably bring her daughter with her, to. I think it's been…six years since I saw either of those two."

A cell phone rings. Yui reaches into her jacket, looking at it, and smiles.

"Guten Tag," she sing songs, "Why, hello there! We were just talking… oh? Well, good to hear. Would you?"

Flipping the phone in her hand, she points it towards him.

"I have someone on the line who would like to speak with you."

Hesitantly, he takes the phone, bringing it up to his ear.

"Um…hello?"

Silence on the other line. He raises an eyebrow, looking at the phone before bringing it back to his ear.

"Hello?" he asks.

"*Um…yes?"*

"Uh…hi?" he says, "Did someone want to talk to me?"

Yui sighs, resting her hand on her head. She motions Shinji towards her, taking the phone from his hand.

"Yes? Okay," she sighs, "Wait…oh, hello Kyoko. No, no, it's not a problem. Look, don't blame…no. No. Look, I'm getting the committee to okay it, and we'll ship you over. Yes, I *do* want you to bring her, she is *not* a burden and I do *not* appreciate you speaking of her like that."

Narrows her eyes, a snarl appearing on her lips.

"No, that *is* an order. I am *head* of Project E, and you *are* going to bring all of them, or you get to cool your heels in Berlin. Really? *Good.*"

She sighs, closing the phone.

"Bitch."

Eyes snap open as he stares at her.

"She is," Yui says with a shrug, "Difficult woman at best. At least the change of scenery should do the girl good."

He taps his fork, brow furrowing as he glances from side to side.

"Who was that?"

"Doctor Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu," Yui sighs, "And that girl trying to talk with you? That was her daughter."

She sighs, putting away the phone.

"Poor girl," Yui says, "Change of scenery will do her so much good. Nothing she does is good enough for that woman."

*

*

The limo, on his request, let him off on the hill leading to the apartment block. Hefting his school bag over his shoulder, he walks, thoughts drifting. At least one thing went right, when he got her the news about her sister. At least that's one less thing on his shoulders as he walks the street towards his home.

"Hey. Sorry your first day sucked."

He starts, turning and finding Rei walking next to him.

"Where did you come from?" he asks.

"Oh, here and there," she says, skipping to her side and walking along the divider line, "You know. Places."

She smiles, that wide, happy, toothy smile, skipping on the white line.

"We sort of live near each other," she says, "I live alone, since your parents are always busy at work. I don't think the Commander and Doctor Ikari've been home all month."

"You…live with my parents?" he asks, turning to her.

"Yeah. Since they found me," she responds, stretching her arms above her head, "Well, last couple of years, at least. Before that, I lived at NERV."

One quick hop, and she walks on the curb, arms out as she balances herself. Shinji watches her as she whistles, each step extended, a caricature of proper posture. Her face is barely readable, with a mixture of joy and…something else.

"Before that, I didn't really live *anywhere,*" she says, "Mainly just the tube my Mom made me in. But, that's close enough to normal, isn't it? You don't really live anywhere until you're born, right?"

"I…guess."

She smiles, leaning side to side as she walks. Her whistling song reaching its climax, she hops off, patting him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it," she says, "Can't get anyone else angry at you now, can you? So, tomorrow'll be a better, brighter day! Am I right?"

"I…I guess so," he says with a shrug, "Okay. I guess it will. I don't think I injured any other students."

She laughs. Loud, and happy, and throaty. He stops in his tracks as she laughs, almost doubling over. Smiling, eyes alight, and maybe *glowing,* she turns back to him, patting him on the cheek.

"If you think *that* was bad," she says, "Ask me about the Third Angel sometime. Now *that* was bloody."

Her knuckles crack.

"And I did that with my bare hands, to!"

The rest of the walk back is spent in silence.

*

*

The clock reads eleven o'clock. Misato hasn't come back from NERV yet, but she said tomorrow will be her day off and she'll be around. He cooked his own dinner and watched television, doing his homework as the other resident, a warm water penguin that surprised him in the shower last night, read the newspaper and had a beer.

It is exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally, that he finally lies down on his bed and starts to drift off towards sleep. Which is, his luck holding out, when the phone rings. Muttering, burying his head

in the pillow as he rolls onto his stomach, he gropes for the phone and opens it, bringing it up to his ear as he flips it open.

"…yes?"

"*…hello?"*

"…yeah," he moans, "Hello?"

"*…am…am I waking you?*"

He props his head up on his hand, turning the clock to him as he sighs.

"No, no," he says, "No, you're not. Who is this?"

Hesitation on the other line. Her voice, and it's definitely a girl, is soft, and low. She's whispering.

"*…um…a fan,*" she says, "*…I saw you fight the Angel. Doctor Ikari said I could talk to you.*"

He chuckles, faintly, scratching his head. Resting his chin on the pillow, he sighs and rolls onto his back.

"Okay," he says, "That's alright. You know…you know my mother?"

"*Um…sort of. Our mothers work together. You don't mind, right?"*

"Nah…I don't. It's fine. You're not another pilot, are you?"

A small laugh on the other line. There's sadness in the laugh, something like longing.

"*No, no. No, she'd never let that happen. I just get to watch.*"

"Oh. Well…it's not that much fun in the cockpit."

"*I know. But…you did kill it. I've never seen someone actually beat one of those things…was it exciting?"*

"It was terrifying," he responds, closing his eyes, "I could have done better."

"*Or…or you could have done worse. I…thought you were brave. Very brave."*

He laughs, faintly. A smile crosses his lips.

"Thank you."

"*I mean it…oh, damn! I-"*

A click and the call ends. He stares at the phone, lying back. Closing it, resting the phone on his chest, he drifts off into sleep.

*

*

The phone closes as the woman pushes her glasses up her nose. Folding her arms, she sweeps back her red hair, some gray evident on it as she stares down at the girl. Sighing, she puts the phone down on the desk, drawing a cigarette from the pack in her hand and lighting it as the girl, her daughter, stares at the floor.

"I have already told you," Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu says, "Not to bother him. He has enough on his mind with you hounding him."

The sixteen year old red haired girl nods, one hand tapping on her desk, and avoiding her mother's gaze.

"Yes, Mother," she says.

"I do not care what his mother says," Kyoko continues, "We do not need to involve ourselves with him. And we certainly do not need people fawning over him when we could do much better with *our* pilot, do we?"

"Yes, Mother," the girl responds.

She reaches out, grabbing her chin, forcing her to face her. The red hair falls down her back, two blue eyes meeting Kyoko's own. The older woman frowns, an expression she wears more and more these days. Although, that would be unfair. Because that would imply that she had a tendency of smiling in the first place.

"Now," Kyoko says, "When the Fifth Angel is dealt with; we will be taking Unit 02 to Japan. For some reason, Doctor Ikari believes *you* should come, as well. So that means it is time for you to take your task seriously, finally, and help me with the pilot. Will you?"

"Yes, Mother."

She lets her go. One of the girl's hands clenches into a fist, knuckles cracking as she stands up.

"I am heading to NERV," Kyoko says, buttoning up the last two buttons of her blouse, "Clean yourself up, dress yourself nicely and come with me. The pilot will be happy to see you. And Asuka?"

"Yes, Mother?"

"Behave yourself," Kyoko says, shrugging on her long jacket, "I will not have you be useless around my Evangelion."

Asuka Langely Sohryu, rejected pilot of Unit 02, nods. A trickle of blood runs down her palm as she walks towards the bathroom. As she opens the door, she lets one last response escape her lips.

"Yes, Mother."

And closes the door behind her.

Chapter 3: Whole New Can of Worms

The suit is, in and of itself, not uncomfortable. It is white at the chest, shoulders, and down the outside of his arms, black at the waist, legs and lower back. Blue highlights are at the chest, along the tips of the gloves and soles of the boots, and a large black 01 emblazoned on his chest and shoulders.

It is roomy at the chest, and he gets from that the distinct impression this suit was initially designed for Rei, self conciously trying to work the wedgie out as he walks out of the locker room and follows the lit blue path down the hallway.

They told him the suit, called a Plug Suit by Dr. Akagi, would feel like a second skin.

She wasn't kidding. He wishes he has a bathrobe or towel, or even a pair of shorts to put over it. He feels *naked.* And not in a *good way.*

"*Hey there!*"

A video screen of Misato's face appears in his right eye, Shinji screaming, backing up and almost tripping. Spinning around, he sees her nonetheless, noticing quickly that the background behind her holds no relation to the background of the hallway.

"*Your plugsuit sends up a video feed to your eyes,"* Misato explains, "*I'm talking to you through Central Dogma, the central C&C of NERV-1. How does it feel?*"

"Like I'm flashing everyone," he responds, shuddering as people smile at him, including the old male janitors, "Do all pilots have to wear this thing?"

"*Yep. Although, judging from the camera feeds, Rei pulls it off considerably better than you do."*

"Misato."

"Sorry, Dr. Ikari. Any case, just follow the lighted path and you'll get to Unit 01's plug, and we can begin the Synch Test."

-

-

Chapter 3: Whole New Can of Worms

-

-

The doors to the mausoleum open as the sole occupant looks up from floating holographic reports. Pushing the glasses up his nose, he stares at the new arrival as she walks in, briefcase under her arm and looking over her PDA before stopping in front of the desk. Pulling up a chair, she slumps down into it and sighs, opening the briefcase and pulling out a folder.

"Well, so far Shinji's adapting," Yui says, "I've checked his phone logs. Asuka called him again, last night. Kyoko wasn't happy."

"Kyoko is never happy. We've established this as stabilizing factor of the universe."

She raises an eyebrow before she rolls her eyes, leaning back in the chair and crossing her legs.

"Gendo, be serious," she says, "When Unit 02 comes over, so will she. We need to figure out some way of running interference that doesn't have her raising all holy Hell in the Geofront."

A smirk appears on his bearded face as he turns back to another financial requisition form.

"Well, what's one more miracle?" Gendo Ikari asks.

"You're not being helpful."

"I was under the impression that we established 'Supreme Commander of NERV' translates into 'Yui's Sounding Board.' But we're not worried about Kyoko as we are worried about what she is bringing over with her. You honestly don't care about Dr. Sohryu or Unit 02. You care about the girl and the pilot."

She smirks, sitting back. Sighing, she nods, running a hand through her hair as she looks over the PDA.

"I've been keeping in touch with Asuka behind Kyoko's back," she says, "That's part of the reason I keep pushing Kihl for the transfer. Something is seriously wrong over there, Gendo."

"And we both agreed to shove Shinji into the giant robot. I daresay

neither of us are getting parent of the year awards."

Muttering, she slaps the folder down on his desk. Hands on the desk, he slowly turns to stare at her, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

"You're insufferable," she says.

"I'm patient," he responds, "We're not going to get any more done by blatantly undermining Dr. Sohryu's authority."

"How about subtly undermining her authority?"

A small grin parts his face.

"Are you pondering what *I* am pondering?" he asks.

She leans closer, faces inches from each other.

"I think so, dear," she says, "But I have no idea where we would get saran wrap in that bulk."

*

*

Once more making sure not to puke in the amber liquid, LCL as they named it, Shinji takes a deep breath and lets the syrupy water fill his lungs. He feels heavy inside it, feels weighed down. Maybe, he ponders, that is supposed to get him used to mentally becoming a giant robot.

Mentally clicking a thought, a diagram pops up in front of him, showing a vertical outline of the purple behemoth.

"Specifics," a cheery voice says in his head, one he does not recognize, "*Evangelion 01 Test-Type. Designer: Yui Ikari. Dimensions: Height 207 feet, five inches. Weight 28,605 tons. Armaments: CLASSIFIED."*

"So…I don't get to know what I can fight the Angel with?"

"Need to know basis," Akagi says, her face popping up in his left eye, *"More will be unlocked as we are certain you can handle the weapons."*

"Wait…so I *level up* in this thing?"

"Not entirely inaccurate…"

"Shut up, Misato."

Sighing, he wraps his hands around the butterfly controls. The lab assistant, Maya, begins calling off numbers.

"First stage pass. Setting plug depth and ionizing LCL. Second stage pass."

Hair on the back of his neck stands up. Blowing out his mouth, he watches the bubbles float up past him, closing his eyes as he concentrates. Reach out, they told him. Let his mind expand and drift and-

Red eyes. Staring. Smiling. Giggling. A warm hand wrapping around his as the seven eyes arrange and alight.

"Welcome baa~aack."

"Synchronization holding at 58%," Maya says, *"Unit 01 has activated."*

Maya's voice brings him back to reality. He leans back in the chair, shuffling his ass.

"Okay, that's all we need," Akagi says, *"Shinji, just sit tight for a half hour while we check your ekgs and data."*

He nods, leaning back. Tapping buttons on his plug suit's wrist, he raises an eyebrow as the neck piece pops and a pair of buds pop into his ears.

"Cool."

*

*

The main problem with the orange and white robotic Cyclops is that the right arm is currently missing. From what he was told, during an activation test, Unit 00 went berserk and tried to kill Rei. Her response to that attempt was to focus on controlling the left arm, engaging the progressive knife, and cutting the arm off to shock the Evangelion into submission.

"Okay," Misato says, hands on her hips as he lets the towel hang over his head, his plug suit, his hair, his skin smelling somewhat like blood and maple, "Shower yourself off and get dressed. I'll drive you home."

He nods. In one sense, he is relieved the day is over.

On the other hand, his day will end with her driving.

"Right," he sighs.

He walks into the locker room, squeezing the twin buttons on his right wrist. The suit expands and air enters, the clinging fabric hanging loose as he reaches behind his neck, undoing the main clasp. The suit comes loose, hanging at his waist as he slides it off, picking it up and opening the chute near the bank of lockers.

Checking the label, making sure it reads 'Laundry' and not 'Incinerator,' he lets it slide down, grabbing a towel.

"Aw, man! And I thought no one was using the boys shower. They're a lot more roomy and let me dance around. You know?"

He turns, and freezes. A trickle of blood flows down his nostril as his eyes start at the face and desperately, hopelessly, fights to keep them from wandering down.

With a towel wrapped around her head and nothing else, Rei places her hands on her pale, well-toned hips and pouts. Casually walking up to him, she stops, takes a look down, and her eyes go wide as she smiles.

"Wow," she says, "And I've seen baby pictures and everything!"

Oh, God this is not happening, he thinks, looking from side to side.

But no. No, it is happening. He is naked in a locker room, and the rather unstable albino girl is currently studiously examining the unmentionables. He could move, but considering that she really looks like she wants to, say, reach out and yank it up to eye level, that may just set her off more.

"Please tell me this isn't what it looks like."

They turn, and someone shrieks. Ducking into one of the locker banks, Shinji quickly wraps the towel around himself, peaking his head out as Yui taps her foot and waits.

"Mom!" he yells, "What are you *doing here?!"*

"Please, I've seen all that before," she says, "My question is what *Rei* is doing here."

"Ooo…busted," she says, tapping her fingers together, "Sorry, Doctor Ikari. I didn't know Shinji was using the shower?"

It comes out as a question, as if she was trying to form a response which would please Yui. In that respect, she fails miserably, as Yui narrows her eyes and clears her throat. Rei sighs, shoulders slumping, before walking over to her, hips swaying slightly as she-

GOD, Shinji chides himself, clenching his eyes shut as he sneaks off to the showers.

The cold, cold showers.

*

*

He sits on the hilltop overlooking the craters, sighing. Adjusting his glasses, he watches the fading sunlight as he scans his camcorder over the recovery crews. His tent is set up, and the weekend will be well spent, indulging his obsession with all things military and technological. A shame the Mecha itself, the Evangelion as the media calls it, won't be in attendance, but he can't even imagine how much that sumbitch costs to deploy.

Kensuke Aida is a happy man at this point, sitting from his high vantage point as he lives out his dream of a real-life Kaiju movie, complete with VTOLs and missiles and nukes, with the monster being put down by human ingenuity.

"Heee~ey."

He turns with his camera. The view levels on her knees, quickly looking up at her smiling, pale face and blood red eyes as she sways back and forth and giggles.

"Uh…oh," he says, "Um…Hi, Rei."

"What'cha doin'?" she asks.

Silence. Pure, utter, silence as Kensuke stares at her, absently lowering his camcorder. He smiles, nervously. Rumors abound, of course, about her. *Her*. What she can do, what she might be. How accurate the theories of her origin may be.

There were rumors that during the battle against the Angel, she was clocking over forty miles per hour while carrying someone over Tokyo-3 rooftops. There were rumors she tore apart a…creature…that attacked her with her bare hands.

"Um…I'm just camping out and watching the recovery crews, Rei. How are you?"

"I'm good," she says, a small drawl on her words, "Tired, though. Wanna help me with something?"

Not waiting for a response, she grabs his wrist and drags him down the side of the hill. She leads him into one of the small mountains, only a mile or so from the scene of the battle in the outskirts of Tokyo-3, where blasts from the Angel made many smooth, cooled caves in its side.

"Rei, where are we going?" he asks.

"I gotta see something," she says, "It's been singing all day and it's driving me crazy. Crazier. Craziest? Is that a word?"

"I…uh…guess so?"

She begins humming. He can't tell the beat or even the song. The song she sings to herself is low, and sad, and slow. Her fingers, clasped around his wrist, move in tune with the music.

"Laaa…da dee da…dum dum dah dum…dadadumdadah…"

"W…what are you doing?"

"That's the song. That's what it's singing. It's calling out."

She stands at the entrance of a large cave, her smile unsteady, walking in as she releases him. He follows, camcorder at ready, watching as she snaps her fingers and forms a ball of light in her palm, shining it into the darkness.

"Is…that some sort of NERV tech?"

"If you want to tell yourself that, sure," she says.

The light centers, shining upon the incomplete, cracked red sphere. The light pulls back, illuminating it. Eight feet tall, lime green, a half grown bird skull head staring at her, elongated arms and legs as it hisses and buzzes.

"Holy *shit!"* Kensuke screams, "What is *that?!"*

"That's the last of the Angel," Rei sing songs, "It hid a bit of itself here when it was coming this way. Knew we were gonna kill him."

The eyes glow. Kensuke screams, and Rei calmly brings up her other arm. The blast flows over and around them, glassing the stone walls and throwing Kensuke's hat off his head, but the brunt is deflected by the orange, hexagonal field.

"I know what you are," Rei says, a smirk parting her lips, "And I know what you want. I know, I know. You have all these colorful names for me. Tool, weapon, you know."

Opening her hands, her smirk turns into a smile.

"But how rude of me," she says, "Let me introduce myself."

For a moment, Kensuke could have sworn her fingernails extended into claws.

"My name is Rei Ayanami," she says, "And I'm going to *f__ing kill you."*

The kick off, her launching herself, throws up rock and dust, throwing Ken off his feet and onto his back with a groan. The camcorder continues recording, the sound of screams, alien and human, echoing in the cave as he looks up, sitting up, watching flashes of light in the darkness.

He can make out some things.

The Angel, what's left of it.

Some creature latched onto it, humanoid but…something else. Something his brain doesn't have words to describe.

A lime green arm thrown past him snaps him back to reality, the sound of glass breaking and bone shattering. Silence once more reigns, Kensuke grabbing his camcorder and pocketing it, watching as something shuffles against rock.

"Hee~ey."

She stumbles out. Her blouse is stained with blood, orange and sticky, her uniform jacket missing a sleeve. Her skirt is torn at the right hem, showing more leg than she probably intended, and her hair…

Her hair is covered in blood. As is most of her face.

"That was fun," she says, "Wanna grab dinner?"

Eyes roll up, and he collapses to the cave floor.

*

*

Humming to himself, he quickly goes through the dinner preparations, the fish sautéing in the large pan as the rice cooker works its magic. Humming to himself, he flips the fish, watching the vegetables brown as his flat mate, his shorter, avian flat mate, waddles out of the freezer underneath Misato's fridge and saunters over to the couch. The television flips on and the penguin reclines, just as Misato exits her room in her tank top and shorts and slumps down onto her chair in the kitchen.

"So, I heard you had another Rei encounter," she says.

He cringes, nodding.

"She's…an odd girl," Misato continues, "She doesn't really have any friends. The only person in school she really, actually talks *to,* not *at,* is Horaki. And even then…half the time no one knows what's going through her head. The other half, we *do,* and then it's even scarier."

She walks to the fridge, taking out a beer and returning to her seat.

"So," she says, "You haven't seen your father yet, have you?"

"I'm used to it," he sighs, "Since I was six, my parents had me live with my uncle. I'd see them usually once a year. They were always so busy that…well, I guess it made sense. I couldn't raise myself, so they had someone do it."

He closes his eyes, turning off the stove. Taking a large plate from the countertop next to him, he shovels the meal onto it.

"Your mother's kept the project alive for the past ten years," Misato says, "She designed the Evas, she made sure everything worked. I know it sucked. Your parents couldn't raise you, but at least you know they were there. Are you jealous of Rei?"

"Because Mom and Dad raised her when they couldn't raise me?"

"Yep."

He sighs, again. Sitting with the dinner between them, he hands her a plate and scoops rice, fish and vegetables on his own.

"I don't think I'm jealous," he says, "I think I'm more confused than anything. I just get a feeling about Rei that something's…wrong, somehow. Something went…something just isn't right. Like the world around her just upped and dumped something on her and she's dealing with the fallout."

Misato nods.

"Yeah," she says, "Something like that. I don't know the specifics. Maybe two people do, and those would be your mother and Rei. And do you know the best way to find out?"

He shrugs. Less disinterest, more because he just doesn't have a way to respond.

"Be her friend."

*

*

Knees draw close as she disconnects the laptop from the power cord, resting it on her lap as she powers it on and checks through her email. To her content, which is quite easy to get to, she finds her friend online, even with the time difference. It is the weekend over there, as well, so she probably has time off. Leaning against the headboard of her bed, she begins.

"Hey," she says as she types, "I don't see you much online anymore."

A moment hesitation, a small line of text indicating that her friend is typing.

I've been busy. Mother's planning on coming over.

"Oh," Rei says, and sighs, "It must be hard on you."

Yeah. She isn't happy with it. She'd much rather have the Angels attack Germany so she could show off.

She grins, nodding. Not that she can see her, of course.

"So…the Third's kind of nice," she says, "Kind of quiet. He's staying with Miss Misato and he's kind of nice."

You said he was nice twice.

"Well, he is. Even when I ran into him in the shower he was embarrassed."

*

*

Narrowing an eye as she stares at the computer screen, she scratches her head.

"Wait, what?" she asks, and begins typing.

*

*

Go over that again. Why were you in the same shower with him?

"Well, I just find the men's locker room roomier," Rei types, "He didn't try to pick me up or anything. He's kind of shy, especially when Doctor Ikari came in, to."

Run that by me, again.

"Rei?"

Rei sighs, craning her neck towards the door.

"I'm in my room," she calls.

She hears the sound of someone shrugging off a coat and kicking off shoes, recognizing the voice of the woman who is effectively her mother. Of course, he isn't here. She hasn't seen him outside of his office or Dogma for about a month at this point.

"I heard you had an interesting night," Yui calls out, distance shifting as she grabs the mail, now padding steps towards the room, "Although I think you might owe Shinji an apology for the locker room."

The door slowly opens, Yui's eyes scanning over bills and letters.

"I also heard something about you going off Section 2's grid," she says, adjusting her glasses as she looks up, "Do we have to-…*OH DEAR GOD!"*

Face and hair still covered in the Angel's blood, Rei watches as Yui freezes, mail scattering on the floor. She takes a moment to consider the situation and the possible consequences, her face lights up with a smile. It is something of a forced smile, as her eyes glance from side to side.

"Would you believe I made a new friend, today?"

*

*

The week goes by quickly.

He considered approaching Rei, offering his hand in friendship, but usually either she was not there or he was busy. Keeping Misato's advice in mind, he determined that such an action would be beneficial to the both of them, if he could ever find himself in the same room as her again.

At least, if they were both clothed.

However, naked excitable albino women are not on the forefront of Shinji Ikari's mind at this point. What is currently on his mind are several thousand tons of giant robot which he is guiding through the outer sections of Tokyo-3, holding a machine gun the length of a subway train in his hands as he peaks around corners.

"Keep frosty, Shinji," Misato says, her face appearing in the corner of his eye, *"The Blue Pattern confirms that it was an Angel. It could also be able to cloak itself."*

"Understood," he says, turning his head, the Eva following suit. This is ridiculous, he thinks.

Standing outside Tokyo-3, the autumn air cool and crisp, the massive shoulders of Evangelion Unit 01 slump as it shakes its head in sympathy with its pilot.

Right before a giant red claw launches it a half dozen miles to face-plant in the dirt. Faster than a 200' tall robot should, it flips onto its

back just in time to avoid the leg that slams into the ground, back jets activating and launching it forward and onto its feet.

The creature is at least five times its size. The claw that hit it is almost as big as the Eva, three more claws surrounding a comically shrunken head with a skull face like the last Angel's. Sixteen spider-like legs carry it aloft, red whips made of nothing more than solid light striking the ground around its elongated, shell-covered body.

"The enemy is a Giant Crab!" Misato yells.

Another screen opens in his left eye.

"Hit its weak point for MASSIVE DAMAGE!"

Another screen opens next to that one.

"Rei! Get off the damn channel!"

The leg comes down again, Unit 01 ducking and rolling out of the way, sending a mental signal. Two pylons on the Eva's shoulders pop open, hands wrapping around the long daggers as motors come to life and they hum.

"Crap," he mutters, and screaming, he leaps. The jets carry him onto the creature's back, stabbing both Progressive Knives into the back and accomplishing the goal of pissing it off.

Ducking under one swipe of the energy tentacles, he grabs another, screaming as the sympathetic pain burns his hands, clenching his eyes shut.

"Rei! What the HELL are you doing?!"

"Helping!"

"Unit 00 only has one arm!"

"Great! So give me a ONE HANDED WEAPON!"

The energy tendril severs off the orange field, reflexively clenching his hands into fists, biting back the pain. Grabbing the knives, he grits his teeth, the remaining tendrils slamming into his AT Field, yanking them slowly out of the armor.

"Hey…you're gonna want to hang on right now."

He looks up. Three miles away, telescoped in Unit 01's vision, Unit 00 waves before hefting up in its good arm the rocket launcher.

"Is she insane?" he asks.

In his right eye, Misato appears.

"That's what I've been telling you."

The entire form of the Fifth Angel rocks as the missile impacts on its face. Shells break off, the armor cracks, as Unit 01 pulls out the knives and a good portion of the armor. Looking down, attached to the rest of the Angel by tendrils and playing light, is a red sphere.

The core.

"Giant Enemy Crab," he says to himself, and grips the controls.

Unit 01 flips the knife in its right hand, eyes glowing as the other hand braces on the bucking Angel's back.

And yelling, he brings the blade down.

Spewing LCL, bucking wildly, the cracked bird skull face lurches upwards as the knife penetrates the Core. The Angel freezes, digging legs into the dirt. The tendrils go silent, solidifying, and with a final lurch, the Fifth Angel collapses.

*

*

Twelve monoliths appear in the darkness, and Yui Ikari goes out to meet them. Hands clasped behind her, beaming under their gaze, she snaps her fingers and a holographic display of the remains of the Angel appear.

"The Fifth Angel," she says, "Shamsiel. He appeared in a different form than was predicted, but was dealt with by the First and Third Children. Now that three Angels total have attacked Tokyo-3, I once more repeat to the Committee my request to have Doctor Sohryu and Unit 02 transferred here."

"Your request has been considered," SEELE-01 booms, "And granted. The Evangelion will be shipped via the Pacific Fleet in one week's time."

She nods, a small smile on her face.

"My thanks, then. The Third Child will accompany me and Major Katsuragi to meet with the Fleet," she says, "The First Child will remain behind, should an Angel attack unscheduled. I will, as always, give regular updates on the progress of Project E. Now, if you will, I must speak with the Chairman. Privately."

The eleven monoliths disappear, the final one fading into the form of Lorenz Kihl.

"You are showing sympathy," Kihl says with a whir and grunt, "We have made allowances for your raising of the First Child. However, your concern for the child of Doctor Sohryu must not interfere with the goals of the Committee."

"They will not, Chairman," Yui responds, inclining her head, "I am simply concerned about the use of the Evangelion Doctor Sohryu has created. She is possessive of it and has shown to play favorites. And I am curious about her chosen pilot."

Kihl nods. Yui smirks, and with a snap of her fingers calls up a holographic personnel file.

"After all," she says, "Doctor Sohryu has told us very little about her son."

Chapter 4: Every Time a Bell Rings

"Oh dear Lord, she's infecting him."

Palming her face, Yui Ikari sighs as they watch clean up crews hoisting scaffolding around the corpse of the Fifth Angel, in the aftermath of what has become known as the 'Crab Battle of Tokyo-3.' Rei screaming out that he had to 'Hit its weak point for massive damage' was bad enough. Shinji then saying they had to 'Nuke it from orbit just to be sure' was the icing on the cake.

Well, at least she finished the report to the committee. Time has come to figure out the logistics of shipping over Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu's ego.

And if they have room left on the Pacific Fleet, they *might* be able to fit her Evangelion, to.

Glancing to her right, at her console on Terminal Dogma, Yui clears her throat.

"Maya? Let's brief the Commander."

Maya Ibuki, 1st Lieutenant and assistant to both Yui and Dr. Akagi, nods.

"Yes, Sempai."

Walking to the right and back, the young woman in the crisp NERV uniform hugs the briefcase full of logistics files and test results close to her chest, ready to protect them with her life. Of course, this is her lot in life. Following in the footsteps of the two women she respects and idolizes.

"I hope you don't mind, Maya," Yui says with a smirk, "But soon, instead of riding herd on two overworked scientists, you'll be riding herd on three."

"I heard Dr. Sohryu is arriving," Maya says, "What is she like?"

"Driven. Single minded."

Yui sighs.

"If it were legal, she'd marry Unit 02. I daresay she doesn't have my

sense of humor or Ritsuko's sense of decorum, but she is more devoted to Project E than just about anyone I've ever met."

Maya nods, smiling.

"And she's also the mother of an Eva pilot?"

"In a sense," Yui sighs, "She treats the pilot like her son. He's…odd. You'll see more of both the children when they arrive."

"Oh? She has another kid?"

Yui sighs. Pushing her glasses up her nose as they enter the lift, the grinds her teeth and nods.

"From the way she talks about her daughter, yes. You would think the pilot's an only child."

-

-

Chapter 4: Every Time a Bell Rings…

-

-

Upon their entering the classroom of 4A, the students erupt with a mighty shout. As one, the arranged student population lets out the cry of *"CRAB BATTLE!"* and then begins loudly humming the fight music from the original *Star Trek* series. Shinji Ikari, pilot of Unit 01, palms his face and groans. Next to him, not noticing or simply not caring, Rei Ayanami, Unit 00 pilot and person of rare ability to use a rocket launcher one handed skips to her desk.

The cheers die down thanks to the venomous gaze from Hikari Horaki. Considering the events of the past couple of weeks, the entire student population of Tokyo-3 municipal high school knows far better than to torque her off. Smiling slightly but warmly to her, he waves.

"Thanks," Shinji says, scratching the back of his head, "Sorry about that."

A slight blush creeps on her face, and she chuckles.

"You saved the world," she says, "I'll let it slide. This time."

He nods, and walks to his desk as class begins.

*

*

There is a tree outside the lunch area, and since it is sunny today, Shinji decided to get some fresh air. Misato overruled his concerns about going to school the day after killing an Angel, and here he is. The problem is, his job is basically killing Messengers of God. Such a thing, especially when such an act saves humanity, should merit him a day off to relax.

But no.

"Yo."

Looking up, he turns from his lunch to the larger boy. One he remembers, who kept the Class Rep from kicking his ribs in the first day he arrived.

"Touji?" he asks.

"Yep," Touji Suzuhara says, folding his arms, "So."

"So."

"You hittin' on the Class Rep?" he asks.

He looks from side to side. He makes sure he isn't being watched.

"No," he says, "I'm just being nice to her."

Touji nods, smirks, and sits down next to him.

"Good ta hear," he says, patting Shinji on the shoulder, "So, you an' Rei killed another of those things, didn't ya?"

"Yes," Shinji sighs, "And I'm not hitting on Rei, either. Although…does she have any friends around here?"

Touji shrugs, reaching into his sweat shirt and taking out an apple. Munching on it, he mutters something about 'nutjob' and 'double jointed' and how those traits should make her more popular.

"Ken's been acting weird around her, though."

"Ken?"

"Glasses kid, military nut," Touji says, "When he realized you and Ayanami pilot giant robots you had to hose him down. I swear, there ain't a single normal person in this city."

Shinji sighs, leaning back on the tree. Reflecting on himself, reflecting on the events of the past couple of weeks. The Angels have managed to actually be less prominent on his mind than they should be. Why is it, he considers, that massive creatures attempting to kill and eat him are not a major concern?

"Heee~ey."

Touji screams. Hanging upside down from the tree branch, hair hanging from her head and a smile on her face, Rei adjusts the hold her toes have on the branch and turns to Shinji.

"What'cha doin'?"

*

*

The elevator doors open, and Shinji looks up as he locks eyes with the sole occupant. Eyes much like his stare back from behind amber glasses, and with a sigh, Shinji steps into the elevator and takes a position next to his father.

"Father," he says.

"Shinji," Gendo Ikari responds.

The doors shut and begin speeding downwards into the base.

"Synch test?" the Commander asks.

"Yeah," he sighs, "Is this necessary? I just killed an Angel yesterday and had a full day of school."

A small chuckle.

"Your mother can answer that question far better than I can," Gendo responds, "By and large, I nod and grunt."

He nods, sighing. Shinji scratches the back of his head, deciding

whether or not to put a little distance between himself and his father. Of course, distance is their specialty. Where Yui Ikari was devoted, doting, and kind, Gendo Ikari had a tendency of looking like he had something better to do.

"What you have to understand is that our work is important," Gendo explains, "And our raising Rei was not to replace you. Rei is different."

"I've noticed as much."

"Not just in personality," the Commander says, "There were several ways Rei could have been brought up. Your mother decided on us raising her personally."

Shinji inclines his head, glancing at his father.

"I get the feeling our orders translate to 'Whatever Mom tells us to do.'"

Silence, for a moment. Finally, a small smirk comes to Gendo Ikari's face.

"After twenty years, I am used to it."

*

*

"We're *what?"*

Misato sighs, leaning on her hand as Shinji stares at her. Silently, she takes out the memo again, holding it in front of him.

"At 0600 hours this coming Wednesday, aka day after tomorrow, you, me, and Doctor Ikari will be leaving to rendezvous with the United Nations Joint Pacific fleet to meet with Doctor Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu and the pilot of Unit 02, the Second Child, in order to meet and greet as they are escorted to Tokyo-3."

He takes the memo, looking it over. Slumping his shoulders with a sigh, he nods.

"Okay," he says, "It says something about guests."

"Bring some friends," Misato says, "Doctor Ikari's orders, this time. It's not that bad, Shinji. You get to spend some time with your Mom."

"I haven't spent time with my Mom for five years," Shinji sighs, rolling his eyes as he drops the memo on the kitchen table between them, "Outside of the occasional lunch where she asks me how my grades are or if I have a girlfriend."

"Because, of course, this isn't misplaced jealousy about them raising Rei and not you."

He groans, palming his face.

"Fine," he sighs, "You're coming, to?"

"As tactical ops commander, my job is to assess the resources NERV will have at their disposal," she says, sipping her beer, "In all honesty, I want to see if Dr. Sohryu's as big a bitch as the legends say."

"Why does everyone call her that?"

Misato smirks.

"Give it two days. You'll see."

*

*

It senses it.

Deep within the ruins of Old Tokyo, buried under the tons of water and debris, deep within the earth, it senses it coming. A small smile parts its great and massive lips, sensing the presence of that which shall be coveted by all. Deep within the darkness, eighteen eyes glow red.

And with a shrug of its massive bulk, and the pulse of the Light of its Soul, it leaves its nest and heads out to sea.

*

*

"Man, Ken's kicking himself for missing this!"

Pressing his hands against the glass wall taking up the side of the VTOL transport, Touji grins as he looks out upon the twelve-ship

strong Pacific Fleet. Not the Military nut his friend is, he still knows something impressive when he sees it. Even from scale, he can tell the massive, gun laden destroyers are larger than their school.

And then, there's the ship at the center.

Longer than any three ships laid end to end, wider than any two side to side. Its deck is covered in white fighter planes and black helicopters, officers scrambling up and down the deck like army ants.

"That's the *Over the Rainbow,"* Hikari says, leaning up against Touji, "Ken told me the story. The day of Second Impact, the carrier was under construction in a drydock at San Francisco. The Tsunami destroyed the dock and everyone thought it was lost. A few days later, it came back to port, wet, a little flooded, but everyone alive. When they asked where they were, someone said, 'Over the Rainbow.' And they gave the ship that name."

"It's a supercarrier," Misato says, both squeaking as she sneaks up behind them, "Heavily armed, like a task force in itself. Only reason it even needs those other ships is because they're around to support Unit 02."

The VTOL jerks, dropping towards the deck of the massive carrier. Resting wheels on the deck as the cigar-shaped craft is tied down, the glass turns opaque before segmenting and folding down into a set of stairs.

"Smiles, everyone," Yui says, adjusting her jacket.

Adjusting the collar of her dress uniform and beret, Misato smirks and follows.

"Nervous?" Yui asks.

"Angels, I'm nervous about," Misato responds, "Scientists, less so."

Shinji trails behind, behind Touji and Hikari as the two chat. As said, Ken was unable to go. Something about being bedridden from the 'excitement' he was experiencing, but Hell if they know what he meant. Scratching the back of his head, he draws in on himself. Wearing his school uniform and a heavy jacket, gloves and scarves, the chill of the sea air batters him against the chill of the awkward situation. Never social, he found out he was much like his father in that respect. Still, his father found Mom.

"Ah, so this is the famous Doctor Ikari and the Third Child."

He stops, looking up. There is an entrance, then there is this. He cannot speak for his own Mom's insistence on how seriously he takes piloting Eva, but there are limits and they involve him having to wear the Plugsuit all the time.

Standing a little taller than him, in a black plugsuit, blood red at the shoulders, chest, and boots, yellow highlights along the arms and legs, he smirks. His skin is pale, his hair the color of ash and gold, and his eyes are…odd. Blue, with hints of red behind it, like one shouldn't mix with the other.

"I am Uriel Dolheb Sohryu," the boy declares, "Pilot of Evangelion Mark 02 and Second Child."

Shinji raises an eyebrow, stopping. He realizes that, unintentionally, he has caught up with the others, and sighs, thrusting his hands in his pockets.

"Wow," Touji says, "I hope those things have pockets for smuggling bananas, 'cause if they don't, you're really happy to see us."

Hikari elbows him in the side.

"Touji!" she growls through clenched teeth.

Grinning, Yui pushes her glasses up her nose.

"I must say, I've looked forward to meeting you," she says, "And, if the rumors are true, I guess that not far behind must be…"

"Correct, Ikari."

Tightening her coat around her, cracking her knuckles with loud pops and narrowing blue eyes, she takes position next to the pilot and places her hand on his shoulder.

"Welcome aboard, Doctor Ikari," Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu says, "Now, if the pleasantries are out of the way, you will want to inspect Unit 02, yes?"

"If this is pleasant, yes," Yui says with a tight smile, "Shinji?"

She turns, finding only empty space where he was standing. She sighs, turning to Misato.

"Damn it," Misato growls.

"No, no," Yui says, waving her off, "My son is not that interested in technical issues. Come along, Misato. I'll begin our inspection. You take care of the kids."

She walks off, whistling, following the pilot and doctor. Leaning back on her heels, she turns to Touji and Hikari.

"You know," she says, "I *do* have the authority to order a missile launch."

Grinning, Touji raises his thumb.

"Sweet."

*

*

Something about the pilot made him profoundly uncomfortable. Then again, he tries to avoid young men in spandex, so it was probably just that, Shinji muses as he walks along the under deck, his NERV ID prominently displayed on his jacket to answer the pressing question of what he's doing down there.

"Damn it!"

Perking an ear, he walks down the corridor, looking at a sign above his head and finding it reading about residential quarters. Hands in his pockets, he walks down the hallway. The doors are closed, locked, save for one. The door is open almost haphazardly, as if opened in a rush. He heard a voice coming from it.

A girl's voice, in particular.

"Just not good enough to come along, am I?"

Walking up to the door, he leans over, looking through the crack of the opening. He can see the occupant, although not all of her. Just enough to make his eyes go wide and heart flutter.

He can mainly see the legs. Long, well toned, seeing a good amount of them through the hem and cut of the long skirt she is wearing, the skirt topping off in a pair of suspenders over a white blouse. The outfit is conservative, modest, but more than enough to give him an idea of

what is underneath, and his hand freezes in mid knock.

And then the ship pitches and he whacks his head on the door.

"Uri," the voice says, "If you came back just to rub my face in this, I swear-"

The door swings open. Rubbing his forehead, Shinji groans, looking up…and freezes. Now he sees the rest. The slim, angular, classical face. The sharp blue eyes and long red hair. Eyes meet and the two freeze for a moment, words lost on their lips. His, a groan, and her, a sharp retort.

"Sorry," he says, "I just heard a voice and…"

Her eyes dart from the face to the nametag. Her memories match up with the name and her eyes go wide as saucers.

"Mein Gott," she exclaims, hands covering her mouth, "You're the *Third Child!* I'm sorry! I'm really, really…sorry."

She averts his gaze, finding something fascinating on the door as he looks from side to side and finally chuckles, scratching his head.

"Okay…I guess I'm flattered that I have fans…"

Her cheeks flush and she backs into the room, clenching and unclenching the hem of her skirt as she clears her throat, more than once, wandering over to the desk and the book abandoned on it. Still standing in the doorway, he leans to the side, slowly letting himself get a good glance at the room's occupant as she shifts from side to side, attempting to look busy.

"I guess I'm more flattered that they're attractive…"

The book drops to the floor.

"Oh…boy. I just said that out loud, didn't I?"

*

*

The door to the side of the mausoleum opens, and peaking his head out, a man pushing seventy in a crisp NERV uniform enters. Rolling his neck with a grunt, he walks towards the desk and stands to its

side, as the occupant of the chair files through floating holographic requisition papers.

"How was Geneva?" Ikari asks.

"Stifling," Kozou Fuyutsuki responds, "Yui has gone to rendezvous with the Second and Sohryu?"

"And insisting Sohryu bring her daughter along," Gendo responds, hands tented in front of his face, "The Fifth Angel appeared in a form different than the Scrolls."

"Considering the incident with the Third Angel, we can assume the Scenario isn't going as the Old Men planned it," the Sub Commander of NERV says, leaning on his former student's chair, "Your thoughts?"

"Dance as fast as we can," Ikari says with a small grin, "And should all else fail, try for one of the less painful spots in Hell when we all die."

*

*

It was not that Shinji's aunt and uncle didn't care about him, it's just that they didn't really concern themselves with the nitty gritty of parenting. So, he had a habit of making quick exits when things got awkward. That situation, with the girl, was more or less his textbook definition of 'awkward.'

This was more for her benefit than his, he tells himself. When he tried to stammer his way out of that, he thought she was going to keel over. He wanted to run as far away from the situation as humanly possible, preferably to the other side of the aircraft carrier.

Then he remembered all the speeches Mom would make about how he had to make new friends, and decided a little queasiness would save him from a lecture for the rest of the damn trip.

The door is still opened a crack. He peaks inside and sees no one there. He knocks on the door, the door swinging open. Leaning in, he looks around. The book is still on the floor. Sighing, he walks in, taking the book and placing it on the desk, looking at the cover. It is a medium sized, paper back book, and he raises an eyebrow as he reads the title.

"Current Themes in Theoretical Biology?" he asks, "Huh…"

The door to the bathroom slides open. She stands in the doorway, freezing their eyes meet, and he drops the book, hand quickly going behind his head, scratching.

"Sorry," he says, "Thought I'd clean up."

She smiles, a shaky, tentative thing. Her lip twitches as she does so, a sound similar to a laugh but less substantial escaping until she finally forms it into a word.

"Hi," she squeaks.

"Hi," he responds, "Sorry about earlier. I'm a little…nervous around people."

"Yeah," she responds, folding her arms under her chest.

Stepping forward, he approaches. He doesn't see the wince on her face as he stands an arms length from her.

"I'd like to try this again," he says, extending a hand, "I'm Shinji."

She smiles, shakily, and takes his hand in a tentative grip.

"I'm Asuka," she responds.

Gears whir and the voice brings back a memory. He smiles, laughing.

"You're Doctor Sohryu's daughter," he says, "We talked on the phone, didn't we?"

She laughs in response, avoiding his eyes.

"Y…yeah," she responds, "Um…you're not with your group?"

"They're inspecting Unit 02," he responds with a shrug, "I don't think too much about the technology. I just let Mom do her work."

"Yeah…if your mother's the person who developed the technology, it must be nice."

Eyes lock again. She freezes, fingers twitching against her arms.

"Can I show you around?"

*

*

The Cages, as they are known, are always filled up to waist height with LCL. Not waist height of humans, though. Instead, they are filled up to the waist of the Evangelions, which serves as both a shock absorber for any accidents and a cushion should anyone fall off the catwalks. That it is quite easy to breathe in the LCL makes the job of maintaining the superweapons somewhat less dangerous, as the arm of Unit 00 is reattached under the supervision of Lieutenant Ibuki, and 2nd Lieutenant Hyuga Makato.

The glasses-wearing man with short cropped black hair has his hand on the walkie talkie at all times, watching with sucked teeth as the armor is fitted into place.

"Well, now comes the testing," Maya sighs, "Once we have all the bolts and restraints fitted in, we can hold full activation tests with Rei."

"Didn't her hijacking it against the Fifth Angel kind of tell us she can pilot?"

"Duress is one thing," Maya sighs, tapping commands on her PDA, files flipping onto the screen, "She got into the Eva to help Shinji. Her piloting it when calm…well, calm for *her* is another matter."

Hyuga snickers. Nodding as the final restraints are fixed into place, sirens sound as the catwalks move away. Rolling his shoulders and yawning, he checks the time.

"Well, let's call this in," he says, "Who do we call? The Commander or Doctor Ikari?"

She snorts.

"Who do you think?"

*

*

"…so, Unit 02 is actually kept on the frigate *Triemene,* which was built by NERV for by-sea Eva transport. Another of the frigates is actually retrofitted to house a nuclear generator an power cable, just in case

we're forced to field the Angel while we're at sea."

The mess hall of the *Over the Rainbow* is abuzz, sailors and officers cycling in and our as the two newcomers enter. Most of the commotion, however, comes from a table at the center of the mess, where a crowd has gathered as Misato loudly recounts the epic battle against the Fifth Angel.

"And there's the man of the hour!"

Naval regulations state that Misato can't get drunk while on duty, especially on a UN aircraft carrier, so Shinji can only assume she's sober. Sober, and using the term 'Crab Battle' and 'Missile to the Face.'

Shinji shudders, shrinking slightly where he stands. Turning his head, he sees Asuka wearing the same small smile she was wearing when they arrived. In fact, he notices her expression isn't changing at all. Tentatively, his fingers touch her wrist. She starts, eyes, wide, half turning to him.

"Are you alright?" he whispers.

"F-fine," she responds.

"Well, who's your new girlfriend?"

Both their cheeks flush bright red at Misato's question as she stands in front of them. Asuka's fingers tap against each other at her waist as she looks down, Shinji scratching the back of his head. Finally, clearing his throat, Shinji gives off a shaky smile and laughs.

"Um…this is Asuka. Doctor Sohryu's daughter."

"I should've noticed the resemblance," Misato says, folding her arms as she grins, "Well, if it isn't little Asuka! Doctor Ikari's been looking forward to meeting you!"

"S-she has?" Asuka asks, snapping back to attention, "R-really?"

"Mm-hm. Once she finished inspecting Unit 02, she was going to go looking for you," Misato responds, one eye on Shinji, "In fact…I think I'm going to give her a call now that you've turned up. Shinji, your friends are on the observation deck. Introduce them."

He nods. Asuka nods as well, fingers still twitching before he leads her out. Watching them go, her eyebrow twitches and her right fist

clenches, muttering a swear.

"What the *hell* did Sohryu do to that girl," she whispers, taking out her phone and dialing, "Hello? Doctor Ikari? Yeah, I've found Shinji, and he's with Asuka. You're going to want to talk with them."

*

*

"…right. Understood, Katsuragi. I'll be over shortly."

Tapping off the earpiece, Yui turns back to Sohryu and Uriel. Uriel taps his foot in impatience, standing before the four dim green eyes of the red and white superweapon, looking between the two doctors.

"Yes?" he asks.

"We'll finish the inspection later," Yui says with an easy smile, "Katsuragi just found my son, and I feel like spending some time with him."

Uriel mutters something German and unpleasant, as the other occupant of the impromptu Cage folds her arms and sighs.

"Really, Ikari," Kyoko asks, "Now, of all times?"

"Before he came to Tokyo-3, I hadn't seen him in four years," Yui says, shrugging, "We ask too much of them. I just thought it would behoove me to spend some time with him. As his mother."

If she notices the dig, she doesn't show it, nostrils flaring.

"Besides which," Yui continues, "I trust you, Kyoko. I doubt I will find anything wrong with either Unit 02 or the pilot. If you will excuse me…"

Turning on her heel, she begins walking to the deck and the helicopter waiting. Snorting, Kyoko mutters under her breath and follows. Grinning as they leave, Uriel turns back to the Eva, *his* Eva, and folds his arms. And waits.

*

*

Touji was overjoyed. Finally, they had met someone normal, an exclamation which earned him an elbow to the ribs from Hikari. Although, relieved to find someone of the fairer sex, Hikari promptly pulled Asuka aside and they began talking.

"Man, you're good," Touji says.

"I'm…sorry?" Shinji asks.

"Cologne? Money? Ya gotta tell me your secret."

Screwing his face in confusion, he turns slightly and inclines his head at Touji.

"Secret for what?"

"Your babe-magnet abilities," Touji chuckles, patting him on the back, "First there's Hikari. I know you two don't go for each other, but she thinks you're cute. She told me, she can't keep a secret. Then, you get to live with Misato. Then there's Rei, who you get to work with. And now this."

"…well, okay. I mean, she is attractive. I admit that. But, I'm not surrounding myself with women. At least, not on purpose."

"Man, if I didn't know you were honest, I'd hate you so much."

The doors to the deck open, heels clapping on metal.

"Well, if it isn't little Asuka!"

They turn to the voice. Next to Hikari, Asuka's eyes go wide, Shinji shifting slightly.

"Mom?"

"D-Doctor Ikari," Asuka says with a small smile.

Yui smiles, walking over to Asuka and taking her hands in her own.

"It's been eight years since I saw you in person," she says, "Look at you. All grown up."

The girl gives off a shaky smile as Misato walks onto the deck. Walking over, she pats Shinji on the shoulder, making him squawk in surprise as she chuckles.

"What?" he ask, low enough to not disturb the other conversation.

"We need to talk," Misato whispers, "Have you met Doctor Sohryu, yet?"

"Not really…"

"Well, you're about to. Good luck."

"Now, why haven't I seen you for the entire trip?" Yui asks.

"I…was in my cabin," Asuka responds, fingers fidgeting in Yui's hands, "Catching up on my studies. Shinji ended up on my deck and I've been showing him around the ship."

Yui beams.

"That's awfully nice of you," she says, "I just came back from inspecting Unit 02. What are your plans when we reach Tokyo-3?"

The door opens. If the sliding door could, it would slam, as feet stomp on the metal deck.

"Asuka!"

The girl freezes, everyone turning, as Kyoko marches towards the girl and folds her arms. Ignoring the glare from Katsuragi and the calm, appraising look from Yui, she folds her arms and looks from behind her glasses upon her daughter, who visibly shrinks.

"The Third Child has enough to do without you dragging him around the ship," Kyoko says, "Go back to your cabin."

She nods, gazing downward.

"Yes, mother."

"Excuse me."

Kyoko spins, leveling her gaze at Shinji. Considering his parentage, it does little to unnerve him.

"I asked her to give me a tour," he says.

Kyoko pushes her glasses back up her nose.

"I'm sorry?" she asks.

"I asked her to give me a tour," he repeats, slower, "Doctor."

Behind her, a smirk on her face, Yui mouths the words, 'Good boy.'

Any argument or discussion is interrupted by the flash of light from the carrier deck, accompanied by the sound of a massive object dropping and causing the ship to list and tilt. The light clears, their vision returning, and Shinji almost hangs from the observation deck's railing at the great thing now kneeling on the flight deck.

200' tall, purple and green, a demonic visage with a single horn coming from the edge of its nose.

"Unit 01," he says.

"What the *Hell* is it doing here?!" Misato yells.

Walking up next to her, tapping on her PDA, Yui grimaces as readings come up on the touch screen.

"It created an Einstein Rosen Bridge using it's AT Field," she says, "Needless to say, I do not like the idea it could be acting independently, but that's not the bad part. There is a total of one reason why Unit 01 would translocate itself here."

The reason comes as Hikari shrieks. They turn, looking starboard, just as a massive plume of water rushes into one of the frigates, splitting it down the middle before it explodes. The shockwave rocks the carrier, as the water breaks and something clears the surface.

It is easily as long as the *Over the Rainbow.* Its skin, its hide, is cream white, a series of dorsal fins shaped like knives running the length of its back. The body is flat, like a series of manta rays attached end to end, flapping wings fluttering in the air, lined with angry red that forms into a sigil of a great unblinking eye down each side. Its jaw splits into three, each lined with great black teeth, and four eyes mark its front, more eyes lining its underbelly and a series of six lining its back, all the way to the whiplike tail half a mile long.

As it dives, the light around it bends and flashes, sending it deep into the ocean before surfaces…and stares at them. A low, moaning growl escapes it, and for a moment, Shinji swears it is *looking at him-*

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

I am.

Through license of He who is called "I Am" I have come.

Though my feet shall never touch the base Earth on this blessed quest, I have come.

In my wake, I leave a Dead Sea.

Before me, lies completion.

I am the Roaring Beast of God.

Angel of the Creatures of the Sea.

I am Gaghiel.

I have come.

Chapter 5: Where Angels Fear to Tread

"Of all my accomplishments, of all I have done, of all I have given to the world, the way I finally brought the Evangelions to life horrifies me and disgusts me more than anything. When I was growing up, I was fascinated by the work of Robert Oppenheimer. He said, once, that he considered a line of the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu was attempting to persuade the Prince to do his duty and to impress him, he appears in his full glory, his multi armed form. He says, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

"When Unit 01 first activated, following the successful test of the Synthesis system, I knew that I had become Death. I am the destroyer of worlds."

-Diary Entry Log, Dr. Y. Ikari, October 18th, 2007

*

*

Sitting on the roof of his apartment building, Kensuke Aida narrows his eyes, furrowing his brow as he goes through the memory of his digital camcorder. He saw *something*, something he needs to get a clear picture of without having to connect it to a computer. Because if he does, he could get into *serious* trouble and-

"Heee~ey."

He freezes, closing the viewfinder/replay window as the hands come down on his shoulder and feels her bending down to ear level.

"What'cha doin'?"

"H-hi, Rei. H-how did you get up here?"

A small little laugh.

"I climbed the side."

"W-w-we…we don't have a fire escape on the outside, Rei."

"Mm-hm."

She clicks her tongue to some sort of rhythm, walking around him and sitting cross legged in front of him. He notices, now, that she is in her pajamas and slippers as she gently takes the camera from him and flips through the video.

"Soooo," she starts, "You recorded me when I killed the angel."

He nods, slowly.

"Aaaand that's classified," she continues, shrugging, "So, you're supposed to go to jail for, y'know, treason. *But,* I have a better idea. Wanna hear it?"

He nods, slowly. He nods not out of actually *wanting* to hear the idea, but knowing that it is a *bad idea* to say no to Rei.

"Weeeell," she says, leaning forward, "I could use some new friends. Aaaand I'm choosing you. Cause if you don't, you'll go to prison for the rest of your life. And not because it'd be long. You're small, kind of pretty, and soft. So you'd be someone's bitch really fast, and then someone would be jealous and knife you in the shower."

She tilts her head, smiling, with teeth.

"'Kay?"

He slowly nods, a strangled whimper escaping his throat. She claps her hands together and pulls his shaking form into a hug.

"Oh, we're gonna have so much fun!" she shouts, "We're gonna hang out and go to movies and talk about school! It'll be great!"

Smiling widely, showing more teeth than a human mouth should be able to hold; she disengages and backs up to the edge of the roof.

"See you around," she says with a wave, *"Best Buddy!"*

And she drops off.

Slowly taking the camcorder, he goes to the images Rei stopped at. She has cleared up the interference for him, so he can finally, finally see what he was looking for. His eyes gaze upon the truth for a long, long moment. Kensuke Aida sees what exactly he is in for.

Eyes roll up into his head, and he collapses onto the roof.

*

*

"The Angel gave off some sort of modified EMP," Yui says, bracing on a railing as the carrier rocks, "We can't raise Unit 02 or the Second Child."

A plume of water shoots up, the wake causing the carrier to list. Gritting her teeth, Misato swears, the kids ducking behind them as Shinji continues staring at the immobile purple mecha kneeling on the launch deck.

"It's playing with us," Misato growls, "As long as Unit 01's blocking the runway, the *Over the Rainbow* can't launch fighters!"

Something impacts below. The entire ship pitches forward, both Hikari and Asuka screaming. Asuka's feet slip, pitching forward and sliding towards the railing and the drop to the deck. Diving, Shinji grabs her, twisting himself around to slam his back against the railing with a pained grunt.

They both turn, slowly, as the carrier continues pitching, leaning down. Soon enough, they both see why. The white fins are on the deck, pulling its massive bulk onto the carrier. The head clears, jaws click-clacking as water splashes onto the deck and sends planes and copters dropping off into the deep. The tail whips into the Pacific, the eyes covering its back glowing as it hisses…

And Unit 01's fist slams into its face. Shrieking, Gaghiel snaps, a second uppercut forcing it to release its hold on the carrier and drop back into the sea. The weight released, the carrier rocks, violently, spraying water over the deck as Misato and Yui grab the railings for dear life.

The ship pitches forward again, throwing Shinji and Asuka off the observation deck as Yui screams-

And both land on a purple landing pad. Looking up into the yellow eyes of Unit 01, the purple mecha gently lowers its hand onto the flight deck, resting one knee against the tarmac before it pitches its head forward and the glow ceases. The metal plate on the back of its neck slides down and the white tube spins out.

"Okay," he says, slowly helping Asuka up, "Asuka, can you get back inside?"

Turning away from the mecha, they turn towards the doors to the interior of the carrier. Right before the spilt oil from the trashed planes catches fire and forms a wall of flame between them and safety.

"Um…no,'" Asuka says, fingers fidgeting, "I t-think the Angel's angry."

He reaches into the folds of his jacket, taking out two white hair clips. He slides them on to just above his temples, pulling off his gloves to reveal white gloves underneath, discarding his jacket and tapping his wrists.

The A-10 connectors spark to life, his eyes glowing faintly.

"I-I've…it's been years since I've been in a plug," she says, staring at the dormant Eva.

"Well, I'm *not* leaving you here," he says, "You're coming with me."

He begins unbuttoning his shirt. She raises an eyebrow in response.

"Mom insisted I come prepared," he says with a grin, and yanks it open, revealing the white synthetic fabric with a black '01' underneath.

-

-

Chapter 5: Where Angels Fear to Tread

-

-

The bridge of the *Over the Rainbow* was in a panic. It has already been determined that the combined UN Pacific Fleet has done all of Jack and Shit to the Angel. The prevailing theory currently bandied about was that the Angel was f__ing with them. Vice Adminal Michael Conker, attached to the fleet from the United States Navy, a man somewhere in his indeterminate fifties with graying hair, a white pressed admiral's uniform, carried the expectation that this would be a cakewalk escort mission, albeit with a temperamental scientist and her creepy adopted son.

But, *no.*

The bridge lurches again, flag officers yelling out as the Angel makes a full breach and dives back in.

"Admiral Conker," the new voice announces, storming onto the bridge with two teenagers, a total of one person in a military uniform and said temperamental scientist in toe, "This is now a *NERV* operation, and I need to commandeer the bridge."

Conker looks the woman up and down.

"And who are *you?"*

The woman smirks, adjusts her glasses, and takes out her ID.

"Doctor Yui Ikari, Director of Project E, third in command of NERV, and the mother of the pilot that's about to save all our asses."

Misato snorts.

"I love watching that woman work."

*

*

The plug lights up. Sitting in the pilot's seat, Shinji watches as the controls light up, track lights coming on along the sides of the cigar shaped object as a dim view of the outside becomes slightly apparent.

"Shinji, it's Mother. Where are you?"

"I'm in the Entry Plug," he says, tapping his wrist, the sides of the chair popping open to reveal a series of switches, "I brought Asuka in with me."

"…damn it. Shinji, having her in the plug is going to probably halve your synch score."

"Mom, the flight deck is on fire. I'm not leaving her out there."

A small chuckle in his ear. His mother's.

"…good boy. Everyone's on the bridge of the Over the Rainbow. Good luck."

He turns, looking over his shoulder. Her knuckles white, Asuka holds

onto the back of the seat, smiling nervously. For her, the excitement of this entire day is giving way to the terror of what is about to happen.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

"I-I hope so," she stammers, her hair floating in the liquid, strands of it touching his cheek, "I-I'll try not to mess you up."

He smiles back, taking a deep breath of the LCL. Turning, gritting his teeth, he flips the first switches.

"Beginning manual activation," he announces, "Stage one: Releasing muscle clamps and setting interface language to Japanese. Stage two:"

The second set of switches flip.

"Ionizing LCL and setting plug depth."

The entire plug lurches. Asuka's hold on the seat breaks, and with a yelp, she falls back into the plug. Slamming the restraints to release, he jumps out of the seat and grabs her wrist before she can hit the metal walls.

"Sorry," she says.

"Don't worry about it," he says, grabbing the seat.

He pulls them both to the seat. Scratching his head, he finally sighs and sits down, pulling her onto his lap.

"Sorry about this," she repeats.

"I can't let you float around loose in there," he says, pulling more slack from the restraints, "Um…you're not uncomfortable with this, are you?"

Both their cheeks flush red, before she finally grabs the restraints and locks them around both of them.

"I-I'll be fine," she stammers.

He nods. Thrusting his hands into the butterfly controls, he grips them and closes his eyes.

"Stage three," he announces, "Synchro Start!"

The plug glows. The walls clear. The entire machine lurches as Asuka

yelps, wrapping her arms around him as the computerized voice ticks off seconds.

"Third Child recognized," it announces, *"Synchronization holding at 138%. Unit 01 activated."*

The controls glow, the spot at the center of his chest glowing in tune with his eyes.

"Level 4 functionality unlocked. Accessing Dirac Armory."

"The *Hell,"* he says, as the walls begin flipping open holographic displays, equipment configurations and weapon diagrams appearing, "Mom? What did I just do?"

The image flips open on the screen, large enough for both him and Asuka to see. Yui raises an eyebrow and smirks.

"I'll give commentary on this *later,"* she says, *"Shinji, Dr. Akagi explained to you that more capabilities of Unit 01 become available as you are able to mentally handle the strain. I'm not sure why, but you've unlocked the fourth level of functionality, giving you access to what's called a Dirac Sea, or pocket dimension, that I built to house special equipment and weaponry for Eva."*

She taps on something off screen.

"Since you don't know how it works," she says, *"I will handle sending you equipment. Stand by."*

*

*

Around the Eva, the air warps as it stands.

"Accessing Type-E underwater equipment."

Miniature turbines appear, latching onto the back of the hands, the back of the feet, and the elbows and knees.

"Accessing Type-F battery pack."

The shoulder pylons disappear, replaced by ones larger and bulkier. Rolling its shoulders, the massive mecha clenches its fists before slamming its fist into its palm, grunting as steam escapes its nostril

vents.

*

*

"You have fifteen minutes of battery power," Yui explains, *"The Angel is circling the fleet and playing with us. Shinji, take it out."*

The image disappears. Turning to Asuka, who clenches her eyes shut as she holds on for dear life, he grits his teeth and watches as the head of the massive Angel surfaces and its tail idly splashes the water. Inhuman eyes lock with his. Watching him.

"This is Unit 01," he announces, "We are engaging the Angel!"

Massive feet slam down onto the tarmac. Taking off in a run, the mecha sprints the distance, a knee bending as it reaches the end. With a mighty leap, the Evangelion takes off, popping open the right pylon and grabbing the progressive knife as it comes down upon the bulk of Gaghiel.

*

*

"How the *Hell* is he doing that," Sohryu demands, leaning over Yui's shoulder and staring at the readout.

The PDA has folded out into a full monitor screen attached to a console on the *Rainbow's* bridge. Turned into a miniature Central Dogma, data reads off, ticking off synch scores and seconds of power as the psychograph reading spikes.

"Shinji's maintained an almost 60% synch score," Misato says, glaring at the screen, "But how'd he manage a seventy point jump?"

"I'm looking into it," Yui says with a sigh, "So many factors go into synch ratio that I could list them well after the Angel kills us. Psychological well being, attachment to others, understanding of the Eva…"

"Um…excuse me, Doc?"

The three women turn as Touji raises his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Suzuhara?" Yui asks.

"Well…ya said 'attachment', right? I mean, I'm not exactly a scientist, but…ain't the fact that he's got a girl with him sort of related?"

The two scientists and tactical chief stare at each other.

"Get some tail, save the world?" Misato asks.

"I am having such a long talk with him when this is over," Yui sighs.

Kyoko snorts.

'About time that girl was of *some* use."

*

*

The presence of the Shadow has been noticed. The Beast of God growls to itself and decides that this will be a test. Of endurance, of durability, and of the survival instinct of the Lilim who has been foolish or brave enough to confront Him. Should they be able to hear past ultrasonics, they would hear a laugh, as the great purple hands grab one of its doral fins.

Inside the entry plug, though, that laugh is neither heard nor noticed. All Shinji hears is Asuka's scream and feels her arms tighten around his chest as the sky disappears to give way to the brine of the sea. He thinks of releasing, and the Eva follows suit. The hand releases its death grasp on the dorsal fin. The plug, Eva, and pilots jerk back in tune with Shinji's grunt.

The LCL ripples, and her hair floats into his field of view. Through the stench of blood he can smell her shampoo. Through the whirring of the engine he can hear her tight, panicked breathing.

"I don't wanna die," she whispers, "I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die…"

The Angel turns, eyes lighting up the deep. Gripping the controls, eyes glowing in tune with the light on his chest, he sends the command. The turbines on the hands and back and legs spin to life, and like a 200' long torpedo, Unit 01 launches itself, bobbing out of the way as the Angel snaps, darting over the Angel and slamming a fist into one

of its eyes, a spray of blue ichor staining the water as it shrieks, another fist hitting another eye as Unit 01 circles, sending ripples through the water as it ducks under the stunned, pained Angel.

Turbines spin to full power. Fists forward, the Evangelion launches at near sonic speeds, both fists slamming into the midsection of the Angel and carrying them both out of the water in full view of the Fleet.

"Swapping out for Type-C flight equipment."

The turbines flash and disappear, the air around Unit 01 warping and shifting into glowing vents on the back, hands, and feet. They start, pulse, and ignite, carrying Unit 01 into the air as Gaghiel's form drops into the Pacific, roaring and snapping as the fleet opens fire, flaming shockwaves from the Rainbow's rail guns striking the glowing field.

*

*

"This isn't good," Yui says, tapping commands on the glowing transparent keyboard appearing before her, "I can't locate the core. It's probably in the Angel's mouth."

"I'd say getting eaten is the last thing on Shinji's mind," Misato says, leaning in next to her, "Please tell me you have something you can send over to him that can let him fry that son of a bitch."

"I'm looking, Katsuragi," Yui snaps, "Let's see…no, Zero Point Cannon would just freeze it, and it doesn't have readable temperature… Dimension Tide would destroy the entire Fleet…"

Yui purses her lips. The screen shows her the inside of the plug, Asuka holding onto Shinji for dear life.

"F__ this," Yui growls, "I'm sending over the Triple Heavy Maser."

*

*

Unit 01's hands snap out, arms snapping out as the eyes flash white. The piping glows bright, iridescent green, the air around the right arm warping as the mecha snaps it towards the Angel. Shifts in the air turn

into rifts, forming into metal plates surrounding the armor of the arm, latching together as the outlines of three barrels form around the hand and branch out into a trigger.

The plates surround the arm, the barrel lengthening, extending, and forming into a death blossom larger than the arm itself.

"Charging cannon," Yui says, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I may suggest that we *look away."*

The lines of blue and white run up the length of the cannon. Inside the Plug, Shinji grits his teeth as the crosshairs center on the submerged form of the Angel. His left hand leaves the control and gently places itself on Asuka's back, holding her close as he clenches his eyes shut.

"Hold on," he whispers.

She nods, closing her eyes with a small cry.

Breaking the surface of the water, Gaghiel lunges. Three jaws part, exposing the red crystal core as it shrieks its rage and fury towards the blasphemy before it.

And then the sky catches fire as if struck by flint, and the cannon lets loose a light that can be seen from orbit.

*

*

"That was Plan B?" Misato asks, blinking, "I *like* Plan B! I could see Plan B through my *eyelids!"*

"Welcome to NERV," Yui says, rubbing her eyes, "God's in his Heaven because He's scared of our superior firepower."

The bridge crew blinks, the light clearing as they stare. The sea is boiling, steam escaping into the atmosphere as the edge of the massive cannon glows and finally cools. A light runs over it, plates seperating down the middle and fading into the place from whence they came.

The air hangs silent as the cannon disappears, the Eva hanging in the air as Hikari and Touji stare at it, relief evident on their faces.

"Doctor Ikari?" Hikari asks, "Is it gone?"

Yui turns back to her console, typing up data. Eyes snap open and she opens a channel.

"Shinji!" she screams, "It's *not dead!"*

*

*

The water parts, the AT field pulsing as it launches itself. Its skin is bright red, several eyes pouring blue ichor into the water. In the plug, Shinji's eyes go wide. Asuka turns just in time to see the mouth open wide, exposing the core as it takes up the entire screen. Her breath catches in her throat, eyes going wide as she finds herself too terrified to even scream as her hand slips and touches his and the controls.

The air around Unit 01 shifts, Gaghiel slamming head first into a hexagonal field. Teeth break and the skin flattens before it drops back into the ocean with a groan.

"Mom," Shinji breathes, "The core's in the mouth. I need some suggestions."

"If you can neutralize the AT Field and get it to open its mouth, we can fire on the core," Misato says, appearing in front of them on the plug, *"On my mark, get back to the carrier deck."*

He nods, turning to Asuka.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

She only stutters in response, her right hand on his left, her other around his shoulders. She is holding on for dear life, and he lowers his head, gritting his teeth.

"If I draw it back to the fleet, people are going to die," he says, "Asuka…will you trust me?"

"I-I will," she whispers, "I will."

"Okay."

He grips the controls tightly. Engines flare and the mecha shoots into the air, twisting around before diving towards the water. His mother and Misato both scream in his ear, and he drives it back, drives back the yelling, as Gaghiel shoots out of the water, mouth open. Unit 01's

fists slam into its face, driving them both into the water as the jets sputter and die.

Are you ready to die?

Shinji grits his teeth, shaking his head.

The fist drives into Gaghiel's mouth and strikes the core. A single hairline fracture comes down the center, and the Angel of the Sea roars, spitting them out before turning and striking Unit 01 in the midsection with its tail.

Shinji grips his teeth. Asuka screams in pain. The Eva is launched from the water, crashing onto the carrier deck. Picking itself up, eyes glowing, it climbs onto its knees and onto its feet as the Angel charges.

Roaring, screaming, eyes glowing and tail slashing the waves, it dives through the hail of fire and artillery, core bared and teeth glowing.

"Damn it," he whispers.

Taking deep, ragged breaths, he looks down. Her eyes are clenched shut, her lip trembling. She is synched, to. Everything that happens to the Eva, *she feels, to.* Releasing the controls, he wraps his arms around her, her shaking slowing down, her eyes looking up to his.

Well…I think this holds promise.

"Damn it," he repeats, "I'm going to eject. Get you out."

"N-no."

"You're hurt," he says, "You're hurt because you're in here!"

"N-no," she stammers, gritting her teeth, "Put that f__er *down."*

He nods. Hands dart out, grabbing the controls. Her hand on his wrist as the connection is made…and his eyes go wide, glowing blue. The entire plug shakes as the core beats below him.

"Synch Ratio holding at 228%. Level 6 functionality unlocked. Access granted to the Magoroku."

*

*

"That…isn't possible," Yui whispers.

"What the Hell is the Magoroku?" Misato asks.

"The single highest power melee weapon available in the Dirac armory," Yui says, "Layman's term: Progressive Sword."

*

*

The green piping on the Eva's arms glow iridescent green, dispelling shadows around it as its eyes flash white like spotlights. Reaching its right hand forward, it opens its hand, and in response, the air parts. Splitting down the middle like ripe fruit, it gives way to a glowing portal. First revealed is the red pommel and blue hilt, twisting grooves along the metal and alloy.

The massive hand of Unit 01 wraps around it, the pommel humming as the engine within it spins to life. The cracks in the air become brighter and more pronounced, a segmented blade of reflective metal pulled from the rift as a low growl echoes through Unit 01's armored head. As the tip clears and the rift snaps shut, the plates of the Evangelion's armor begin to glow, and shift.

Those who look closely can see the outlines of eight claw-shaped wings hovering behind it. Those who listen can swear they hear the thing breathe. As the hands close around the handle, the edge of the blade glows with orange light, the hum of the sword's motor spinning like a nuclear turbine.

Shifting the sword, one foot back and braced, Unit 01 holds it at eye level. Eyes flashing, glowing, a burst of steam escapes the nostrils of its demonic mask. Only enraged, only driven by hunger and pain, the pale red form of Gaghiel dives into the deep, the water lapping waves against the carrier deck before the light around the Angel shifts.

With speed and mass on its side, it breaks the surface. Its entire bulk clears the water, mouths open, eyes centered on the Eva, and roaring like the unchained beast it is. And finally given a clear view of the target, Unit 01 shifts its entire weight and swings.

The blade cuts the air, leaving a trace of the orange light. The air shifts, the air cuts, and air itself becomes the blade, crossing the distance before silently passing through Gaghiel itself.

The Angel hangs in the air. A low, mournful wail escapes its mouth, the final sound it will be permitted to make, before it parts diagonally down the middle. The Core cracks and collapses, shattering in a small shower of blood and crystal before the great bulk of the Sixth Angel glows, flashes, and finally explodes.

As the light clears and the ocean rocks the fleet, Unit 01 releases its grip on the sword. Lines of white wrap around it and it vanishes, returning to the Dirac, before it pitches back and collapses onto the deck of the carrier as the glow in its eyes fades.

*

*

In Central Dogma, Rei claps her hands together and squeals.

"Oh my God!" she screams, "They *explode!* My life has *new meaning!!"*

Sitting at the highest station, Kozou Fuyutsuki raises an eyebrow. Gendo Ikari blinks.

"We need to switch that girl to Decaf."

Chapter 6: Welcome to Tokyo3

The door shifts open. Sliding along railings, it deposits itself in the doorway, allowing her a clear view of the apartment interior. Holding her suitcase in her hand, Asuka blinks, peering in, the two other residents watching as she slowly, tentatively, takes the step across the threshold.

"I'm home," she announces.

-

-

Chapter 6: Welcome to Tokyo-3

-

-

The door shifts open, and with a sigh and a rolling of his eyes, Uriel Sohryu walks onto the bridge and straight into the disapproving gaze of Doctor Sohryu and Doctor Ikari.

"Where were you?" Kyoko asks.

"During the attack, the frigate sprung a leak," he responds, "Considering communications had been cut, I could not board Unit 02, and instead chose to aid the crewmen in keeping the vessel from sinking. I understand the Third Child saved us?"

"And your sister," Yui responds as Kyoko bristles, "We will be arriving in Tokyo-3 shortly. The Commander and Dr. Akagi will meet us there. I suggest cleaning up before we arrive."

He nods, clapping his heels together.

"At once, ma'am," he responds, and strides out. As he leaves, he clicks his tongue. He considers detouring to speak with the Third, but thinks better of it. Katsuragi will be monopolizing his time, something about him disobeying orders.

Orders, orders.

He killed the Angel. Isn't that enough?

"Uri?"

He snaps out of his thoughts, regarding the owner of the voice. Hands behind him, chest puffed out, he smirks, a sight which makes her profoundly uncomfortable.

"Asuka," Uri says, "I heard. You had quite an adventure."

Asuka nods, folding her arms under her chest. She winces as she does so, prompting him to raise an eyebrow.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Feedback cracked two ribs," she responds, "They told me I was in synch with Unit 01 during the fight."

"I see…don't tell Mother."

She nods, hair falling over her face.

"She's in a sour mood," he says, reaching out to touch her shoulder and finding her flinching, "Remember, this was to be her shining moment, but Ikari's son showed her up."

"And showed you up, to."

"I will have my chances," he mutters, "What's your opinion?"

"Of?"

"The Third Child."

Her face turns bright red. She taps the tips of her fingers together as her breath warbles. She pulls away, nervously tapping her foot, before turning.

"I-I should go," she says, and quickly walks down the hall.

Pursing his lips, Uriel watches her leave. Perhaps he *will* pay a visit to Mr. Ikari, after all.

*

*

He opens his eyes, wincing as he hears the knocking on the door.

Sitting up, Shinji Ikari adjusts the bandages on his chest, grabbing a buttoned shirt and hastily throwing it on as the door opens. Misato Katsuragi, a head taller than him, purple hair falling down her back and green eyes amused and a little peeved, leans against the door and clears her throat.

"Are you familiar with the concept of 'following orders'?"

He sighs, nodding.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"For?"

"Not returning to the carrier when you ordered," he responds, "Not telling you why I was not returning, and nearly getting Asuka and myself killed."

"Okay. Will it happen again?"

"I…no," he responds with a grunt, "I'm not going to blindly obey, but I will tell you if I think the order's the wrong one."

She smirks, pursing her lips.

"Mm hm. You are aware I'm tactical commander for a reason, right?"

He grunts an acknowledgement, head dipping down as he tries to avoid directly looking at her. She walks into the cabin, swinging out a chair and sitting on it.

"Actually…Misato, can I ask you something?"

*

*

It is not every day an aircraft carrier comes into port at Tokyo-3. Especially an aircraft carrier with a kneeling Evangelion on the flight deck. The armor is somewhat red, due to rust from the salt water from the remaining day of the journey, in addition to heat from the Angel's explosion. From a certain point of view, Unit 01 seems to be sleeping, or contemplating. Both would be true, but would require a far longer explanation of the actual true nature of Evangelion 01 than is permitted at this time. Instead, the people who are in the actual know are silent, and watching.

"This will take a bit of explanation," Kozou Fuyutsuki says, hand over his eyes as the *Over the Rainbow* docks on the port side, a stairwell driving up to the side exit. The two are waiting, leaning on a black stretch limo as container trucks and dock workers clear the area for the coming entourage.

"Which part?" Gendo Ikari asks, hands in his pockets, "Unit 01 creating a wormhole? Shinji managing a triple digit synch score apparently thanks to a *wash out* from the Eva program being in the Plug with him? Or Unit 01 going, as Katsuragi put it, 'Voltron on the Angel's ass'?"

"Kihl will have a field day."

"Kihl licks my wife's sneakers like everyone else does," Ikari says, and walks from the limo towards the stairs.

*

*

Yui clears the last stair just as she spots them approaching. Smiling, she lets her husband take the last steps. Makes him jump through the hoops she always does. Taking her hands in his own, he sports a small, knowing smirk. She stands on her tip toes and lightly presses her lips against his.

"I heard you had an adventure," he says, "If I had known there was an Angel there, I wouldn't have let you get on that ship."

"First off, you couldn't stop me if you tried," she responds with a smile, "Second, I knew there was a chance, and I wasn't going to let our son go there without me."

"I'm right here, you know."

Standing in the naval uniform, Shinji tucks the cap underneath his arm and sighs. The uniform wasn't a problem. It was the least the Fleet could do for the sixteen year old kid who saved them all. The problem was, he didn't take any other clothes with him, so his wallet, SDAT player, and only pair of sneakers are currently at the bottom of the Pacific.

"Good job," Gendo says.

"Yeah…thanks, Father," Shinji sighs, "I'm going to catch up with Misato and Asuka. Okay, Mom?"

"Fine. We'll go out for dinner tonight, all of us."

He nods, and walks away. Gendo spares him a glance, and turns back to her.

"Rei made a friend."

"Oh dear Lord," Yui says, rubbing the bridge of her nose, "How?"

"Blackmail, intimidation, and surprise."

"Her parents must be so proud."

"Shut up, Kozou," Yui says with a glare, "We will see how this develops. We may have to tell Shinji about Rei. Soon."

*

*

The suitcase is about two thirds her height, weighs a total of around fifty pounds, and has more or less everything she needs. Contained within the case are clothes, most of which are heavily wrinkled at this point, her laptop, and a few prized possessions. Everything else, she left in Berlin. Deep down, she did not believe she was going to be staying for long, and even if she was, it wasn't like she accumulated much in the way of material goods.

The carrier has already unloaded its main cargo. A small fleet of VTOL lifters, with stockier and wider bodies than the combat aircraft, are carrying away both Unit 01 and Unit 02, the red and white behemoth looking almost peaceful as it hangs from dozens if not hundreds of cords.

Asuka says nothing. She has not said a word since they left the ship. Her hand is tight around the handle of her wheeled suitcase, knuckles white, as she waits for her mother to finish barking orders regarding her luggage. Her teeth grind, and she winces when she chips a back tooth. She does not complain, though. Mother does not want to hear complaints.

"Asuka!"

She nods, faintly. She does not raise her head to look Kyoko Sohryu in the eye as the scientist walks over, her arms folded and her face, as always, a disapproving scowl. Since she cannot blame or rail against the Third Child for her perceived humiliation, once more it is her daughter who must play the part of scapegoat.

The hair hides the eyes, red and hollow, watching only her white-knuckled hand on her suitcase as she waits for the verdict from on high.

"Section 2 will escort you to a hotel," Kyoko says, "You will fly back to Berlin in the morning."

"Yes, mother," Asuka responds.

So, this is it, she thinks. The end of the adventure.

Well, of course, she chides herself. Just going to the other end of Eurasia wasn't going to *actually* change anything. Even if she actually helped a Pilot destroy an Angel, she is still the same worthless little girl who got bounced out of the program when her own *Mother* wouldn't hear of it. He could probably have done the job better if she had better sense than to get in the plug with him.

Her palm is bleeding again as her nails dig into it, and she drives down the thoughts of just *hoping* something might change in a new country-

"Actually, there's a change of plans."

Kyoko clicks her tongue.

"Katsuragi," she sighs, "What. Do. You. Want?"

"Change of orders," Misato says, Asuka seeing her out of the corner of her eye with Shinji next to her, "Asuka's staying in Tokyo-3 for the duration. Considering all the questions she has about the Angel and Unit 01 kicking its ass, Dr. Ikari wants Asuka here."

"I do hope you have some sort of arrangements," Kyoko sighs, rubbing her temples, "The apartment I rented has room for me and Uriel only."

Her fingers release the handle as Shinji places his hand on it. A small smirk is on his face, and once more, he stares into her mother's gaze and does not flinch.

"There's an extra room in Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi's apartment which Section 2's converting into a bedroom," he responds, "If you don't *mind*, Doctor Sohryu, Asuka can stay with us."

She can barely hear the conversation over her heart pounding in her ears. I'm staying, she thinks. I'm staying because they're standing up to Mother. But…why?

The question repeats itself in her head. The Professors at the college kept telling her that no one does anything except when they have a reason. Eyes dart under the bangs hanging over her face. She spots the crystal blue eyes, the warm smile. Mother would tell her, of course. What reason he has for wanting her around.

Not bad as far as reasons go. She wouldn't mind. He is a pilot, he is brave. Such a sacrifice on her part to save the world is the least she can do. He won't ask, of course. But, Mother would tell her, that is what he wants.

"Hey, Ikari!"

She blinks, first time in what feels forever, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Touji and Hikari have joined them as Mother stalks off, continuing to bellow orders for her equipment to be handled carefully.

"What'd we miss?" Hikari asks.

"Not much," Shinji says, hefting up Asuka's suitcase, "Asuka's going to be staying with Misato and me."

Hikari glances at Shinji, narrowing her eyes.

"Not what you're thinking," he responds.

"Really, now?" she asks.

"Really."

"Man, you're good," Touji says with a laugh, arm around Hikari and pulling her closer, "You're not even tryin' and you're just ropin' 'em in-"

Elbow to the ribs, courtesy of Ms. Horaki, and Touji's face turns bright red and contorts.

"Anycase," Touji groans, plastering on a smile, "Welcome to Tokyo-3. You'll get along here fine."

She smiles. Her pinky nail is caked in dried blood at this point. Her jaw is hurting from the trembling and it is taking every once of her willpower to keep from screaming.

"Thank you," she says, throat tight, tongue scratchy and dry, "If…if you'll excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom."

Smiling, ignoring the questions, she calmly walks from the group and towards the public restroom on the other side of the docks. Hands tightly curled, she shoulders open the doors and calmly walks into a stall, locking it behind it as she takes deep breathes.

And falling to her knees, the day catches up with her as she empties her stomach into the toilet.

*

*

The last thing she wants to do is work, but the task before her is harsh, long and not going away. Walking into his office while he goes over the results of the battle with Gaghiel, Yui gives his chair a spin before popping open the monitor screen built into the desk and logging in.

She stares at the screen, watching as her email message pile up.

It is only through her own abilities of self control and calm that she does not scream. Only her knuckles crack and her fingers freeze. And a single word escapes her lips. A name.

"…Ichi?"

*

*

Washing her face, rinsing the water through her mouth and spitting, Asuka takes a moment to fix her hair. Satisfied, she smoothes out the ends of her dress and exits the bathroom, walking towards the waiting group of…friends. Is that the word?

Okay.

Friends.

"ASUKA!"

That wasn't one of them. Turning, she comes to the conclusion that shout came from the dust cloud heading her way. Tilting her head, mouth open as she tries to form a question, she doesn't see the look of dawning horror on Misato's face.

"*Ohmigod-ohmigod-yourefinally **HERE**!*"

Carried by momentum and sheer exuberance, Rei's opening bear hug lifts Asuka off her feet, the pale, red eyed girl screaming jibberish as she swings around her long time pen pal like a rag doll, the others watching in a mix of horror, concern, and knowledge that getting between Rei and another person is a bad idea.

"How'd she get here?" Shinji asks.

"She ran," Misato responds.

"We're twenty miles away from the city."

"Again," Misato says, "She *ran."*

Having released her without cracking something, Asuka stumbles back towards them, Rei practically swinging herself into her steps as she goes on and on about everything they'll do together and how good it is to finally see her.

"They're pen pals," Misato says, shrugging, "So…Section 2 should have finished moving that bed in. Let's get home."

*

*

He convinced Misato not just to give Asuka one of her spare rooms, but to move his things into the smaller bedroom. He doesn't need a huge amount of space to live in, and the rest of the apartment makes up for that. Besides, it was a nice gesture, and from what time he had with the girl thought she could use as many of those as possible. Misato swore she would tease him mercilessly for this chivalrous act, though.

He'll live.

He excused himself as Misato started showing Asuka around. Walking

to the desk in the corner of the room, just in the view of the window, he slumps down into the chair and opens the notebook. He'll have to get a new player, he muses as the laptop boots up, And sneakers. He'll have to do that all after school tomorrow, but they'll probably have a synch test.

So at least two days until he can get back into a comfortable routine.

Logging onto the email server, he mentally files through the list of messages. One from his mother, saying she needs to speak with him as soon as he can, so that means a trip to NERV. Some from Ms. Horaki. She keeps him updated on the status of her sister, especially since Mom moved her to a NERV facility, and…

"Ichi?" he asks.

On the screen before him, for the first time in six years, is a message from his oldest friend. Shortly after he was sent away, his mother had him start sending emails to an address she provided. The girl, Ichi, is probably his oldest friend. They talked for hours when he was growing up, separated from his parents. She, to, didn't have her parents with her, and their loneliness acted as a beacon for each other to give each other someone to *talk* to.

And then she disappeared, six years ago, just when they were starting to get comfortable with IM conversations and maybe even attempting a phone call.

"I am sorry it has been so long," the email reads, "But I only recently have received email privileges again. I would like to resume our conversations if that is comfortable with you."

"Where have you been?" he types.

He wants to tell her about his current situation, but he wouldn't be surprised if NERV monitors his email. Sighing, he hits send, and turns to call Misato for a ride to NERV.

Another email appears. Already, she replies.

"My mother told me I could not be your friend," the email reads, "But I would like us to be friends."

*

*

There is a blue relief schematic of Unit 01 on the side of the office. The carpet is soft and worn, and everything is functional. The office is not big, about half the size of the mausoleum is father keeps himself in, with large windows and a hanging lamp providing soft light, and a crescent desk with neatly stacked reports separating him from the owner.

It is said that one of the reasons NERV runs so efficiently is because Dr. Ikari actually runs NERV, and it is impossible to stay on her bad side.

"Hello, Shinji. Take a seat, please."

Obedient son as always, he pulls up a squeaking swivel chair and sits.

"I received an interesting email today," Yui says, one eye on the screen in front of her and one on Shinji, "Did you?"

"Yeah. Ichi emailed me," Shinji responds, "She said something about having family problems, but that's over. So, she's emailing me again."

"I see," Yui responds, and sighs, "Shinji, I wanted to talk with you about Asuka. I understand you convinced Katsuragi to take her in."

He sighs, scratching the back of his head. Yui smirks, folding her hands on her desk.

"Do we need to have the Birds and Bees talk?"

"No," he groans.

"Shinji, I appreciate what you are doing," Yui continues, "Asuka has had a very hard life. Her mother has, without intention, damaged her. Are you going to take advantage of this?"

His eyes snap open, and he stares at his mother.

"What? No!"

Yui nods.

"Good," she says, "Treat her with respect. This will be a new thing with her, especially considering the environment she is coming from. Try to understand her. I know you are sometimes upset with how your father and I handled things regarding you, but we did not ship you off to your aunt and uncle and forget about you."

"I know," he sighs, "You were so busy here that you wouldn't have time for me."

She laughs, softly, her hand in front of her smiling mouth.

"And you came out alright," Yui responds, "You are intelligent, kind, brave, and caring. I have no doubt that you will do the right thing by her."

She turns back to her screen with a sigh.

"Now," she says, "You have a synch test tomorrow. Ritsuko and I both have no idea how you managed a 200% synch score, so we're going to try to get to the bottom of this. Get some sleep, alright?"

"Alright," he sighs, standing up.

"And Shinji?"

He turns back to her.

"Good work."

He nods, shoulders slumping, and ambles out.

*

*

The laptop is on her desk, her clothes are in the closet with some school uniforms courtesy of Dr. Ikari, and Asuka has changed into a red, oversize nightgown going down to her knees. Lying on the bed, she holds the raggedy girl doll at arms length, humming to herself as she flaps it around.

"So," she says, "How are you enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, I think we'll have lots of fun here!"

"Really?" Asuka asks, "What sort of fun? Not the type Mother would approve of, would it?"

"Mother doesn't approve of anything, Asuka! Mother never did!"

She sighs, laying the doll next to her on the bed as she stretches her arms above her head. Sighing, watching the ceiling fan, she takes a

lazy, long look around her bedroom. The bed is nice, and big, and she can stretch out over it like her mother's bed in Berlin. The room is painted powder blue, and there is a book case and desk by the window.

The closet is big, and maybe at one point she will fill it past the dozen outfits she brought with her and the five school uniforms Dr. Ikari gave her. But…she doesn't know how long she'll be here. Maybe they will find her to be useless here, to, and…

"Don't," she whispers, clenching her hands, "Don't think that. I'm useful here. Useful. Useful."

Bites out those last words. She should see a dentist about that chipped tooth, but doesn't want to be a bother. She's had others, and learns to live with the pain in time. She learns to mask it, so not to worry them, and they all have much more important things to do with their time than worry about the little girl.

The clock is at eleven o'clock, and she can't put this off any longer. She does have to be up early for school, and she does look forward to it. Hopefully it will go better than the last few schools she has gone to.

Swinging out her lets, bare feet on the wood floor, she walks out of the room silently. She knows how to sneak, a talent she picked up in Berlin, when Mother would sleep off a bender and she needed to use the bathroom without waking her. The door opens slowly, lifting the door slightly to keep the wood from grinding, and she sneaks into the hallway.

The bedroom door, labeled by Misato as 'Shinji's lovely Suite' is right next to hers, across the hall from the bathroom. Slowly, carefully, she opens the doorway. He is sleeping, in shorts and a t-shirt, half on his back and side and the covers twisted around him. The bed is up against the left wall, making her job a little easier in that she can use the wall as leverage. Tip toeing in, she leaves the door a little open, softly moving towards the bed.

His face is peaceful, if only marked by the occasional twitch and groan. She can ask about that tomorrow.

She carefully unbuttons the top two buttons of her gown, enough to offer a little view, and climbs onto the left side of the bed. Sliding underneath the covers, she lays on her side, resting her head on the pillow. Sighing, she draws her knees in close, closing her eyes. Well, she figures, nothing more to do than just wait.

*

*

Lately, the nightmares Shinji Ikari experiences have managed to be more interesting, but that is more based on his current life than anything else. His nightmares used to involve the night after Mom got out of the big robot, when Father had to rush her to the hospital. Professor Fuyutsuki, her friend, talked with him about how Mom was hurt, but didn't really…show it until that night.

Something about Mom crying and Father…well, Father being Father.

Now the nightmares are the Angels. His nightmares are him finding Nozomi Horaki, only instead of her legs being crushed, they have her being stomped to a fine paste by a berserk Unit 01 before it eats her while he watches.

Now they involve that fish-angel, and…

Groaning, he opens an eye. The clock reads just after midnight. Sighing, he shifts in his bed, rolling onto his right shoulder instead of his left…and comes face to face with Asuka. Her lips are parted, and she is lightly sleeping, and he has no idea what she is doing in his bed.

Her lips flutter with her breathing, her arms wrapped around her. He shifts in the bed, shimmying to his left, putting a little distance between them. What is she doing here, he asks himself. Misato will have a *field day* with this. Sighing, he lays on his back, figuring the lecture about responsibility he will get from Misato and then from his mother can come tomorrow. Because neither of them will believe him when he says she just climbed into his bed. He can barely believe it.

Especially a girl as beautiful as her.

"…be good this time…"

She shifts, her eyes twitching, clenching as her breath starts. He turns to her, rolling onto his side.

"…don't wanna be sent away, mama…"

The next words are gibberish. Her entire form seems to fold on itself. Her lip quivers and tears start falling on the pillow, her breathing sharp and ragged. Slowly, carefully, he reaches out and touches her

shoulder. Eyes snap open and wide with a start, her breathing a sharp, quick intake and her face bright red. Their eyes meet and her lip trembles before she wraps her arms around herself, knuckles white.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

"I…had a bad dream,:" she says, "I walk in my sleep."

"Okay," he says, nodding, "Are you alright?"

"I…guess," she responds, "Sorry."

"It's alright," he says with a small smile, "It's alright. I don't mind."

She smiles back, lips shaking at first, and then reassured. Sliding out of the bed, she climbs off, padding towards the door.

"Good night, Shinji," she whispers.

"Good night, Asuka."

As the door closes, he lays back on the bed, arms akimbo and staring at the ceiling fan.

"What the Hell was that about?"

*

*

Lightly walking back to her room, she makes sure Misato's door is still closed. Softly walking into her room, she closes the door, standing for a moment before resting her back against the doorway. Lips tremble and tears fall down her face as she runs a hand through her hair, resting the back of her head against the door before leaning forward.

"Stupid," she whispers, "Stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid."

She walks, stumbles back towards the bed. Her palms have scabbed over from before, some scars along the lifeline.

"He wouldn't do that with you," she whispers, "He wouldn't want a girl like you. Not a useless little girl whose own mother doesn't want her."

Stumbles to the bed, sits on it, and picks up the doll.

"What should I do?" she moans, "Will he hold it against me? Will he think less of me? I don't know what to do…"

"Let him decide that," the doll squeaks back, "Did he seem angry?"

"No…"

"Did he try to take advantage of you?"

"No, but that's because-"

"What if," the doll asks, "He didn't take advantage of you…because he might like you?"

She pauses. Eyes go wide, mouth hanging open as she considers that tidbit of information. She purses her lips, avoiding the doll's gaze before turning back and resting the doll on her lap.

"But…but that's not possible," she says, "No one likes me. Mother doesn't like me, so how could anyone else?"

"Rei likes you. Hikari talked to you. Misato took you in. So maybe people do like you?"

"I…maybe."

She lays the doll down, laying down next to it, resting her head on the pillow as the anxiety begins to drain out of her.

"Maybe."

She closes her eyes, splayed out on the bed, her breathing slowing.

"Maybe."

And when she next opens her eyes, it is morning, and the smell of a cooking breakfast brings her from her slumber.

*

*

Uriel was given a standard beige NERV uniform, and with his black shoes clanging on the metal catwalk, he enters the central Cage area. Taking a moment, he admires the great and massive red form of his Unit 02, pernicious bitch that it may be, before his musings are cut

short by someone clearing their throat. Turning on his heel, a practiced motion, he comes face to face with a young woman with short brown hair and an eternal smile, holding a PDA and clipboard.

"Lieutenant Ibuki?" he asks.

"Welcome to NERV-1, Pilot Sohryu," she says, "Inspecting Unit 02?"

"Sort of," Uriel says with a tight smile, "I know Unit 02 like the back of my hand, to use cliché. I was more curious about the purple one. Unit 01. I have heard several stories of its ferocity back in native Germany, and was curious to see it up close."

Maya chuckles, walking past him. He follows, hands in his pockets, shaking the uneasy feeling that he is being watched.

"Well, you're in for a treat," Maya says, "We're about to give Unit 01 it's morning stretches."

"Stretches?"

Tapping her PDA three times, she holds it over her head and clicks a button on the side. Speakers crackle to life around the cage.

"It's Friday," she says, "So that means it's Classic Rock day."

Music begins pouring through, a light, bouncy tune. Uriel perks his ear as he hears something grinding.

"~Your love/Is lifting me Hiii~gher/~"

The catwalks around Unit 01's cage shift away from it.

"~Than I've ever been liii~fted Before!~"

Unit 01's head moves. As the song continues, the head moves back and forth. The entire Evangelion shifts a few inches to each side, the sound of metal grinding matching with the beats of the airy, eighties classic rock song.

"Unit 00 does something similar," Maya says, "But only when we really fire up the MAGI and play a lecture by Dr. Akagi. The first one, mind you, not the one on staff."

Uriel clamps his mouth shut. The question comes to mind that he feels, despite how ridiculous it is, he has to ask.

"Is the Evangelion…dancing?"

"It's a sort of sympathetic reaction," Maya responds, "It can act on its own to a degree, and it seems to enjoy music. Artificial intelligence at its best."

The head is swaying side to side as the song ends, a burst of steam escaping the nostril vents before it shifts back into place. The catwalks resume their normal position, the glow of the eyes subsiding.

"It knows the rules," she says, "We do this three times a day, and as long as it doesn't cause any problems we keep doing this. Does Unit 02 do anything like that?"

Uriel affords his Evangelion a glance. As always, the red beast is silent.

"No."

*

*

Gears whir in his knees as he walks down the hallways of his grand estate. Having just finishes a conversation with Doctor Ikari about the repercussions of the destruction of the Sixth Angel, he is anxious, to an extent. He does not allow his anxiety to conquer nor control him. Such is not his way or his method. No, such things are beneath him. He is the epitome of control, he muses as he passes priceless paintings and fine grain wood walls, so much like his heir.

And so much different.

For example, Lorenz Kihl hates music.

He would much rather fill his days with experiments and science than the simple repeated rhythms of some brass bells slamming together or the vibrations of taught wire when smacked by keys. Unfortunately, his heir and trump card is an artiste.

And so the east wing of his mansion is filled with the sounds of triumphant orchestra and classical music, and as he approaches he hears the sounds of a pipe organ belting out music and tune and Kihl simply lowers the sensitivity on his artificial ear drum as he opens the door. The boy, the young man, slams his fingers without a car and

perhaps without even a plan. Such things are common, with him.

The music pauses. He notices Kihl, and with a single smooth motion turns.

The pipe organ occupies the entire room, a great twisted thing of gold, brass, and tin. The chair for the musician is twenty feet up without ladder or stairs, the rest of the organ twisting down into a mass of wood and metal. Of course, such matters as a lack of egress are of little concerns to the artist.

With a smooth motion, he leaps from the bench. He pauses in mid air, the air humming, rippling as he hangs before slowly lowering down.

Pale skin, ash hair, and golden red eyes, he smiles as his eyes meet Kihl's visor, and bows.

"Chairman," he says, "What may I do for you?"

"The Scenario needs to be adjusted," Kihl responds, "Tabris. What do you know?"

Chapter 7: Focal Shifts and Date Night

As lunch time rolled around, the token new student had garnered quite a following. When the morning classes started, the girl introduced herself, bowed, and promptly sat down next to Ikari. Questions were going around whether Ms. Sohryu was the pilot of the red Mecha that was unloaded yesterday, but she was tight lipped.

Still, she had a nice ass. That's what really piqued the interest of the group of grade 11 boys discussing the mysterious posterior of the mysterious transfer students, and what, if anything, they wanted to do about it.

Gathered around under one of the trees in the schoolyard, conversation is bandied around as they watch her have lunch with Ikari, Horaki, and Suzuhara. Phrases such as "I would tap that" and "What's Ikari got that we don't?" are bandied about.

Then, there is another phrase added into this conversation.

"Heee~ey."

The group turns, as one, to come into the crimson gaze of Rei Ayanami. Eternally smiling, hands clasped behind her, she sways back and forth on her feet.

"Soooo," she says, "Just wanna tell you, Asuka's my bestest friend. And if you touch her…"

She narrows her eyes, only slightly.

"I touch you."

She smiles, rolling her shoulders with an audible crack.

"'Kay?"

-

-

Chapter 7: Focal Shift and Date Night

-

-

"Let's go over this again. The Evangelions were re-worked in 2011 to have features locked away for the mental stability of the pilots. As synchronization increases, more features become available as the perspective of the pilot matches the perspective of the Evangelion."

Ritsuko Akagi clicks the remote in her hand, the projection screen shifting into a cross section of Unit 01, overlaid with its appearance during the fight with the Sixth Angel.

"Level 1 starts at 25% synchronization, which is the normal borderline for activation, and goes to 65%. This is your normal, entry level capabilities. More or less, you are now in charge of a 200' tall giant robot. Level 2 goes from 66% to 85%, and features enhanced strength and speed, which couples with Level 3 at 86% to 105%, which has increased reaction time."

The screen shifts again, this time to Unit 01 holding the massive Triple Heavy Maser at Gaghiel.

"Then…we get tricky."

*

*

She is smiling as Rei talks to her. Well, Rei's method of speaking is usually speaking at someone instead of with them, but in this case the pale girl seems to be interested in Asuka's response. This is probably a good thing, Shinji muses.

"Sooooo, we have our synch tests, and when we're done with that, I was gonna go home. What about you two?"

"Probably home, to," Shinji says, rolling his shoulders, "I think I'm still tired from the past few days."

Asuka smiles, averting Shinji's eyes. Rei frowns, shrugs, and continues skipping along. The subject of the last night is not broached, but he doesn't seem to hold a grudge. Instead, he smiles at her, and she returns it, albeit shaky and unsure, her hands clasped together as they walk along the street leading towards the Geofront, passing the artificial hill top and the alarm towers.

"Ikari!"

The voice is loud and accented. Walking down the hillside street towards them, clad in his full uniform, Uriel stops in front of him and snorts. Asuka visibly shrinks, leaning towards Rei. Shinji sighs and affords Asuka a glance before turning to her brother.

"I would like to talk with you, Third Child," Uriel says, puffing out his chest, "And where are you going with her?"

Asuka shrinks more. Reflexively, Shinji's nostrils flare as he notices Uriel is a good head taller than him, standing on his tip toes to meet him in the eyes.

"Asuka," he says, "Is coming with me to the synch test, and then I'm walking her home."

"She is not NERV personnel."

"Then she's coming with me as a guest," Shinji responds, "And in any case, she has the right. Because, last I remember, she helped me kill that last Angel. So we're just going to say she's my copilot."

Uriel glares. Shinji smirks, folding his arms.

"Hey," he says, "Last I checked, Asuka has more experience fighting Angels than you do, doesn't she?"

A grunt and his hand grabs the front of his white school shirt and picks him up. Asuka squeaks, Shinji grunts, and Rei goes silent. His shoulder hits the pavement when Uriel drops him, the pale boy's face red, livid, steaming as he brings back his fist.

Crack.

One knuckle. Red eyes narrow as Asuka hears a second *crack* from Rei's hand. Then she sees it, the first sign of something being terribly, terribly wrong. Rei has stopped smiling.

"I should *beat* that smirk off your face-"

"Stop."

Uri stops in mid word. The air seems to chill five degrees. A small hint of teeth are shown and the last knuckles pop as Uriel locks his gaze on Rei and finds his breath caught in his throat. Clearing his throat, slowly unclenching his fist, he suppresses the shudder and turns back

to Shinji.

"Don't let me or Mother catch you on base, Asuka," he growls, "I will see you soon, Third Child."

He marches off, swearing. Rei walks over, grabbing Shinji by the arm and yanking him to his feet.

"For someone who hasn't seen combat, he's pretty arrogant," he says.

"H-he's like that," Asuka says, forcing a smile, "I-I should just go home."

"No, you're not," Shinji responds, "Not for him. I said I'd take you to NERV, so I'm taking you to NERV. If he has a problem with it, he can take it up with me, Rei, or my mother. Okay?"

She nods, turning to Rei, only to find her already skipping down the street towards NERV. Her shoulders slump and a breath she didn't realize she was holding escapes.

"I-if he didn't stop," she says, "What d-do you think R-Rei was going to do?"

"I think," he responds, rubbing his shoulder, "We *don't* want to find out."

*

*

One of the benefits of working for a semi-clandestine organization with a theoretically unlimited budget is that all the ranking officers of NERV have really nice phones. The phone that Misato uses in her official capacity of Tactical Ops Commander and 4th in Command of NERV has a touch screen, fast wireless, and was configured by her second as an email server. Considering that the predominant theory is that Synch tests are mandated by the Commander to give them something to do between Angel attacks, it is with no guilt whatsoever that Misato clicks through emails as Dr. Ikari oversees the placement of the plugs in their three working Evas.

"Hot date?"

Looking up, snorting, and giving the stink eye to her long time friend,

Misato turns back to the phone. Sitting in one of the back chairs of the Pinbrow Box, she says nothing as Ritsuko sits down next to her.

"Actually, yeah," Misato responds, "Dr. Ikari already cleared it. I went on one of those dating websites and got a blind date for tonight."

"Right," Akagi says, folding her arms, watching as Yui directs Maya through the processes, "What about the kids?"

"Shinji said they'd be fine. He's tired, anyway, and Dr. Ikari wants to speak with Asuka after they're done here. Section 2 will give them a ride back, and I'm not planning to be out past 10."

"Mm-hm."

"Answer me something," Misato says, clicking through messages, "If Unit 01 can yank giant laser guns out of Hammerspace and Form Blazing Sword to kick an Angel's ass, how come it didn't do that before?"

Times like this, and Akagi wishes she could smoke indoors. Sighing, removing her glasses and rubbing the bridge of her nose, she thinks of a way to explain it that Misato would understand.

"If Shinji tried to access the Dirac Armory anywhere below 106% synchronization, it would fry his brain," she says, "The higher the synch, the more the pilots are in tune with the Eva's perspective. They may have the proportions of a human, Misato, but the Evangelions are not human. The typical human brain cannot handle the higher level functions, but the Evas can."

"Okay, we're ready here!"

The two old friends sigh. Misato slaps her knees and stands.

"Back to work we go."

*

*

She is sitting in the guest chair, reading her college thesis when she enters her office. Asuka starts, closes the book, and puts it back on the shelf as Yui affords her a small smile, walking past her and over to her desk. Clicking the green button on the right side, the onboard

computer starts up. Sitting in her chair, shifting her seat to get comfortable, Yui folds her hands on her desk and takes a moment to look at the girl.

"Come closer."

Asuka nods, pulling the seat in front of the desk. Her lip is twitching, her hands folded but her pinky finger moves back and forth. Smoothing her hair back so the bangs do not fall over her face, she sees that the girl is nervous, but attentive.

"Asuka, Section 2 at all time keeps tabs on important personnel," Yui says, "As you are the daughter of one of my chief scientists that includes you. So, please tell me what you were thinking when you went into my son's room, last night."

Asuka's face turns down, head tilting as she wrings her hands.

"Did you try to take advantage of him?" she asks.

The voice lacks accusation. She knows the details, and just wants to hear them from Asuka.

"N-no."

"Did you want him to take advantage of you?"

Hesitation. More wringing, her shoulders shaking as, once more, she is put on the spot.

"Y-y-yes…"

"Why?"

"I-I heard that m-my being close to h-him helped him against the Angel. I-I thought i-if…"

Yui raises her hand. Asuka goes silent, shoulders tightening.

"I understand," she says, "But listen, Asuka. Please. I appreciate your concern with Shinji, but that approach will not work with him. Who suggested that approach?"

"I-I did,' Asuka responds, "Synchronization is partially affected by mental state and attachment to others. So, I though…"

A small smile crosses Yui's face. A small chuckle makes Asuka look up,

as Doctor Ikari taps buttons on her keypad and brings up the holographic image of a diagnostic report.

"Shinji's synch ratio is up to 67%," Yui explains, "I can partially credit the fact that he has developed an attachment to you to explain that. It may even be that he likes having you around, Asuka, but I assure you of this: Even though he is something of a celebrity, now, he is actually not quick to create attachments. Do you understand?"

She nods.

"Good. Now, I called you in here to ask you some questions. Answer them honestly."

The hologram shifts, becoming a red sphere, cut in half, mathematical gibberish labeling cross sections of layered material.

"What is this?"

"Um…I-I don't know."

"You do, Asuka," Yui says, folding her hands, "We both know that you do. Again, what is this?"

"I-I honestly don't know, Dr. Ikari-"

"Asuka, I have biorhythmic sensors lining this office, and they tell me you are lying. Once more or I ship you back to Berlin. Tell me, what is this?"

Clenches her eyes shut, chattering teeth as her knuckles turn white.

"It's the cross section of the core of an Evangelion. The labels are for the solenoid-based crystals that make up the inner layer, storing the central intelligence. The outside is reinforced, which while leading to lower data storage reinforces the structural integrity of the inner core."

Yui nods. Clicking another button, the diagram becomes a cross section of a massive humanoid.

"Cross-section diagram of Unit 03. Each Evangelion from Unit 03 onward is based structurally on the construction of Unit 02."

Click.

A section surrounding the Core of an Evangelion, sinew of cable

leading around it.

"I…don't know, but I can guess that is a data transfer relay," Asuka says, looking up at the diagram, "Is it…Unit 01?"

"Correct," Yui says, clicking a button and causing the holograms to fade, "Asuka, what is your bachelors degree in?"

"Evolutionary biology," she says, finding herself actually meeting Yui's gaze.

"Excellent," Yui says, nodding with a smile, "Asuka, would you like to work with me?"

Her lips part, her mouth hanging open. Slowly, she nods.

"I need an additional assistant," Yui says, "You have studied my notes and your mother's work. Three days a week, after school, you will report to NERV. You will act as my direct assistant and aid me with the projects I run as head of Project E. You will be given an ID, a stipend, and access under my supervisions to the Evangelions. Is this acceptable?"

She nods, quickly. Her eyes light up as she her heart begins racing, sitting up straight in the chair.

"Yes," she says, "*Yes!* I…thank you, Doctor Ikari!"

"Don't thank me yet," Yui says with a laugh, "Now, get going. Shinji is waiting for you."

Smiling, she stands, before walking out of the office and breaking into a run as the door closes behind her. Leaning on her hand, Yui watches the girl go, switching off the computer as she sighs.

"Don't thank me yet, Asuka," she says to herself, "Not when you see what I have planned for you."

*

*

She keeps a nice dress in her office, which being in the closet she can find under the normal mess that occupies her work space. The dress is a black, Chinese style that she bought with Ritsuko's recommendation, covering her cleavage but emphasizing her figure, 'not giving it away',

as she said.

Bomber jacket slung over her shoulder, holster on the inside of her thigh, Misato Katsuragi enters the western style restaurant, escorted into the busy dining area by a waiter who is two inches taller than her and, to Misato's flattery, checking out her ass.

Problem is, this is a blind date. She doesn't know who she's looking for, either, so…

"Your table, Miss."

Red table cloth, candle, a bottle of wine in a cooler and a menu accompanied by the date's grin, stubble covered chin and ponytail completing the nightmarish portrait of what she's just walked into.

Silence hangs between them, him tapping his fingers on the table.

"Hey, Katsuragi," Ryoji Kaji says, "Small world, isn't it?"

Knuckles crack.

"Like you wouldn't believe."

*

*

"Have you ever been out of the country?"

Turning from the wok, he shrugs, turning back to the simmering vegetables as she finishes spreading her homework around the living room floor.

"Outside of going on the aircraft carrier, no," he responds, "At least, not that I remember. Mom did say she's met with your mother before, so it might have been when I was a little kid."

Asuka thinks, shrugs, and turns back to the math homework.

"I'm pretty sure my mother would come here," she says, "This IS NERV Central, after all."

He nods, shrugs, and continues working the vegetables, checking the pan with the fish in it before turning to the cupboard and taking out two plates. Placing them on the low table, for once cleared of garbage

thanks to a thorough cleaning, he empties the contents of the pants onto the plates before sitting down.

"So, tomorrow's Saturday," Asuka says, sitting across from him, "Um… what do you do on Saturdays?"

"I was planning to go to the NERV hospital," he responds, picking at the rice with his chopsticks, "And visit Hikari's sister. You can come, if you want."

"I-I guess so," she says with a small, nervous smile, "I-I have to study Doctor Ikari's notes about her work, but I think I-I have time."

"Great. I'm sure she'll like the company," he says, mixing the vegetables, "So…"

"So…"

"So…"

They both sigh. Waiting long moments, trying to find something to speak about, Asuka finally bites the bullet and looks up.

"I'm…I'm sorry about last night," she says.

"It's not a problem."

"I-I still shouldn't have done that," she says, tapping her fingers on the table, "So…I'm sorry. Y-you're not angry?"

He shrugs, smiling. Chuckling, scratching the back of his head, he shakes his head and sighs.

"I don't know why you did that," he says, "But I'm not angry. Okay?"

They continue eating, Shinji finding his gaze drawn towards her hands, out of curiosity. He's noticed the fidgeting, the tapping. Then he gets a look at her palms and sees the angry red lines running across them, the small marks.

Then the phone rings. Sighing, he takes the phone, looks at the number, and clicks it on.

"Misato? Okay…okay. We'll clean up."

Clicking off the phone, he turns back to dinner.

"Misato's going to be later than she thought," he says, "Her date's… taking longer."

"Mm."

"I don't want to think about what that means," he sighs, "I really don't. Especially since I've never been on a date myself. There wasn't really enough people around my aunt and uncle to consider that and…I'm ranting, aren't I?"

"No," Asuka says, "No, I've seen ranting. That's not ranting."

He chuckles, nodding.

"Well, I guess it's just this city," he says, "And our parents. If I didn't know better, I'd say my Mom's already marked you as her daughter-in-law."

Her face turns beat red as her utensils clatter to the plate.

"I said that out loud, didn't I?"

*

*

System log-in. Welcome, Dr. Ikari.

Opening IM chat: Chat room participants: Dr. Ikari, Ichi.

"Ichi?"

Yes?

"I would like to try work association. Please tell me what comes to your mind when I mention these names."

Understood.

"Shinji."

A person who wishes to be my friend.

"Asuka."

Someone who Shinji wishes to help very much.

"Misato Katsuragi."

Someone who wishes to take care of them. To be their big sister.

"Ritsuko Akagi."

Nice lady. Much nicer than her mother. Takes care of me.

"Rei."

Very strange. Feels strange around her. Know her face but not what it is.

"Okay. Who do you like more, Ichi? Your mother or your father?"

Mommy.

"Why, Ichi?"

Mommy cries about me when no one is looking.

*

*

Hands braced on the catwalk, the Supreme Commander of NERV narrows his eyes, staring at the purple mecha as lights shut off for the night shift. Leaning on his elbows, he feels the exhaustion in his bones and soul. Still altert, he listens to the footsteps on the catwalk and grins. Some habits never change.

"If I had my way," Gendo says, "Unit 01 would be dismantled, destroyed, and its Core shattered with a *jackhammer*."

"You still wouldn't do it," Kozou says, standing next to him, "Because you're less emotional than Yui. As much as you hate Unit 01, we still need it."

"It tried to murder Yui," Gendo growls, "And we put our son in there to fight monsters. I have no love lost for that monstrosity."

"And no one blames you. But we work with the tools we are given. As it is, that monstrosity has destroyed three Angels under the guidance of your son."

The old man grins, chuckling.

"Maybe it's trying to make up for the past. We know it's intelligent. Do you think it has a conscience?"

"Assigning emotions to a machine? Professor, I thought you were an academic."

"An academic who looks for the *occasional* challenge," Fuyutsuki chuckles, "Be honest, Ikari. My role is the sign off on whatever budget expense Yui needs for her latest project. I feel that we are both marginalized by the good Doctor."

"Who is in earshot and looking for her husband."

Sneakers padding along the catwalk, Yui ambles her way over. Clapping her hands, she leans over and pecks Kozou on the cheek before taking her husband's hand.

"Maya and Ritsuko are processing the synch tests," she says, "So I think it's time for us to turn in. Don't you think so, dear?"

"I'll agree to that," Gendo says with a smirk, "Fuyutsuki, handle the rest."

The Sub Commander of NERV nods. Watching them walk away, he sighs, smirks, and turns on his heel.

"Lucky bastard," he says, and walks towards the lifts.

*

*

Clicking her tongue, she waits for him to stir. As he does so, opening bleary eyes and finding his hands tied behind him, she smiles, reaches into her purse, and clicks the trigger of the stun gun, letting him watch the arching electricity.

"Hey there," Misato says, "I drugged your wine. We're gonna have ourselves a conversation, aren't we?"

A small wave and a smile. He shudders. She's sober. She's *dangerous* when sober.

"Misato Katsuragi," she says, "Tactical Commander to NERV-1. Hi."

"…buh?"

"So…you're, what, a quadruple agent? Quintriple? Lost count?"

He chuckles, rolling his neck.

"Actually," he says, "I'm taking orders from Commander Ikari. How about you?"

She sparks the stun gun again. He begins sweating as she hops off the table in the dark, empty room lit by a single swinging light bulb. Grimacing, she reaches into his pants pocket and takes out his wallet, flipping through cards.

"Well, f__."

Taking out a NERV ID card, she rolls her eyes.

"Ryoji Kaji," Kaji says, "Special Inspector to NERV-1. Hi."

*

*

"Laaa dee dah dee dum…dadadah daaah da dum dee dum…"

"Um…Rei?"

"The song's different, this time. Louder."

Clicking her tongue in the rhythm, she stands at the top of a mountain three miles outside of the Tokyo-3 limits. The lights of the city shine in the distance as she tilts her head, raising an eyebrow and perking her ear as Kensuke struggles up the last of the mountain.

"Hm…laaa dee dah dee dum…da-da-deedah daah dumdeedah…hm…"

"Rei, please tell me why we're here," he says, sitting on a flat rock, "We've been wandering for five hours. I'm tired, I'm thirsty, and I'm sore."

She smiles, turning to him. Folding her hands behind her, she looks around, ambles over, and sits next to him.

"Soooo," she says, "Do you want to pilot?"

He turns to her. Sweat sheens his face, his hair is matted and his glasses are filthy. Sighing, he leans on his knees, groaning.

"I dunno," he says, "Well, I guess. I think the Evas are amazing, and I'd love to get up close to them. But…okay, I guess I do. Why do you ask?"

"Even if it's scary?" she asks, "You know, like me?"

He laughs, nervously.

"Um…you're not scary, Rei."

She leans in. In the right light, Kensuke swears her eyes glow.

"Reeeaaaally?"

He can't remember how he slid off the rock. He just remembers falling onto the ground and finding Rei leaning over him, grinning. Pausing, eyes narrowed, she stands up and begins walking down the kill. Scrambling to his feet, he runs after her, skidding down the hillside.

"Rei! Rei, what is it?!"

She pauses, stops. Sniffing the air, she closes her eyes. The grin, the smile, disappears. A small sound escapes her lips, like a breath run over the keys of an organ.

"Rei, now you're freaking me out," he says, walking up to her, "Rei, what is it? What do you…oh, f__ it."

He takes his own life in is hand and grabs her arm. Her hands snap out, fingers splayed as she turns to him. The red of her eyes has spread over the entire eye, small dot like pupils at the center. If possible, her skin has become even more pale, her hair stringy, the grip now on his arms tight and trembling.

"He's here," she whispers.

"What's here?" he asks.

The air around them shifts. Looking around, looking up, he sees a framework forming around them, forming into six great points in the shape of a massive diamond.

"Oh, God."

"Close," Rei whispers, "But a close second."

*

*

Somehow, Shinji has found his hand wrapped around Asuka's, as they exit the hospital within sight distance of the NERV-1 pyramid. She smiles, returning his, as they walk towards the escalator. Nozomi was beaming, did not hold a grudge, and an absolute terror in her wheelchair. The physical therapy was coming along well, and she was well within the prognosis of three months to a full recovery.

That Hikari was there and happy to see them both made it even better. That she doesn't hold a grudge makes it right.

"So," he says, "Do you want to head back?"

"I-I guess," Asuka says with a small smile, "Did you want to?"

"Well…I do know there's a nice ramen stand near the apartment Misato likes," he says, "Want to grab some lunch?"

She blushes, before taking a deep breath and returning his smile. In the artificial light of the Geofront, he finds her eyes more interesting than usual, almost sparkling during those rare moments she gives off her smiles.

The movement of her lips, the pleasantness of her company, both are things he finds rare but valuable. It isn't like he's known many girls his age, though, except for Ichi. He knows she is odd, knows her quirks, but finds that the reward of the occasional smile makes their friendship all the more pleasant.

"T-that sounds nice," she says, "Um…"

The alarms whine. Shinji's phone rings, a text message rolling across the screen. Gritting his teeth, he growls, turning back to her.

"Angel alarm."

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

--

-

-

-

I AM

THROUGH LICENSE OF HE WHO IS CALLED "I AM" I HAVE COME

THOUGH MY FEET SHALL NEVER TOUCH THE BASE EARTH ON THIS BLESSED QUEST, I HAVE COME

MOUNTAINS SHALL SHATTER IN MY PASSING

MY SONG IS THE CALL OF THE END OF DAYS

IN MY PASSING SHALL THE DEMON CHILDE OF LILITH BE EXCISED FROM THIS WORLD

I AM THE THUNDER OF GOD

ANGEL OF LIGHTNING

I AM RAMIEL

I HAVE COME

Chapter 8: Bringing the Thunder

The floors of the facility speed by, as in the confines of the lift, the pilot fits on the last of the suit. Based on the notes they were able to acquire, they managed to make a working replica, given with their own modifications to the design. The plugsuit was specialized, but their version, they decided, needed to work with a bit better utility.

Over the skin tight fabric, armor is fitted. Not one plate, but segments, allowing the armor to breathe, but at the same time allowing flexibility and contact between the pilot and the liquid medium of the cockpit. Fitting and twisting on gloves, the interface dials on the back of the palms glow, spinning to life as woven in processors hum with comforting warmth.

The shoulder harness and plates move with the suit, preventing it from getting caught or rendering her immobile. The plates around her thin waist curve downwards, allowing full freedom to move her legs, the blue piping running down the outside of the limbs glowing in the faint light of the elevator. Rolling shoulders, rolling neck, she fits the last of the helmet on. As it closes over her face, the respirator and filter come to life, the triangular tricloptical display glowing as the black screen in front of her eyes flicker and show her a crystal clear vision of the inside of the lift.

"Okay, this is Rusty," she says, her voice clear, young, chipper, "SUIT's up and running. I'm running connection system diagnostics. How's Big Guy?"

"Rusty, this is CinC. Big Guy is undergoing final system startups. We have spotted the ET designated Angel: Ramiel at 15 miles outside of Tokyo-3 proper. We have sent Agent to NERV to clear the way."

She flexes her fingers, the signal sent and received. Her view of the world lights up, shifting between wireframe, thermal, night vision. Windows open around her face, showing the image of the Earth far below, the outside of the facility, and the inside of the launch bay. Soon enough, she thinks, she'll be there herself.

Power settings, sensitivity controls, and mass ratio readings chime off. A general power meter, the operational power reading of the code-named 'Big Guy' appears on the right side of her screen, confirming system primary activation. Excellent, she thinks. And her smile only grows wider as the elevator passes into the central cavity of the Bay.

It stands two hundred and fifty feet tall. Its shape is humanoid, gunmetal gray and polished titanium plating at the extremities. Its torso is made up of the same type of moving plates as the suit she wears, venting heat from its central core. The shoulders are massive, ending sloped downwards in massive vents, the head a raised circular dome jutting forward from the body between the shoulders, a honeycomb display of opaque gold plates serving as the sensory grid.

She clenches her right fist. In response, the right fist of the massive robot clenches as well. The center of its chest glows blue as the main reactor comes online, steam issuing from the sides. Technicians cheer, personnel clearing the area as the lift stops, exiting onto a catwalk leading to the massive robot's head.

"Rusty, this is CinC. Primary system startups complete. We are beginning secondary systems check and we are beginning primary startup for the delivery system. ETA for Jet Alone Prime launch is at T-minus: 5 hours and counting. Let's get this show on the road."

-

-

Chapter 8: Bringing the Thunder

-

-

With every motion, the air around the Angel vibrates, creating music and song. The song is not human, a vibration of noise sounding like a gothic shout announcing its presence to the world. The cry of the Angel of Thunder reverberates, as the eight sided diamond of the clearest crystal blue crosses the horizon. The beautiful and sublime form of Ramiel has come to Tokyo-3.

Wisely, the humans flee.

*

*

"Tokyo-3 is at full evacuation to Geofront shelters," Lieutenant Hyuga Makato announces, taking a second to push his glasses back up his nose, "Converting Tokyo-3 to battle configuration."

The screen of Central Dogma flips to showing a cross section diagram of the city. The tallest buildings shift and move, dropping into place at the barrier between Tokyo-3 and the Geofront. Several screens turn to the cameras above ground, watching as skyscrapers drop into their holding pens, suspended miles above the Geofront floor as plate steel doors close, reducing Tokyo-3 from a bustling metropolis to a series of low apartment buildings and armor plating as far as the eye can see.

Arms folded, eyebrow twitching, Misato Katsuragi watches the displays, a direct feed from the Cage detailing Unit 01's final preparations.

"How'd it go?" Ritsuko asks, the brunette scientist ambling up next to her.

"It was Kaji," Misato responds, "He was my blind date."

Ritsuko sucks on her teeth, nodding.

"That had to be awkward," she says, "What did you do when he broke up with you, again?"

"Set his car on fire," she responds, twisting her lip as Maya calls out activation procedures, "I'm not sure, 'cause he acted surprised, to. But, he's a lying bastard half the time, so he probably set him up."

"What did you do?"

"Drugged his wine, tied him up, threatened him with my stun gun to find out who sent him."

Ritsuko stares at her, smiles, and turns back to the screen.

"Kinky," she says, "Just like college, hm?"

Snorting and muttering a dirty word, Misato walks over to Makato's console and picks up the walkie talkie. Clicking it on, standing up straight, Shinji's face appears on the screen, faint yellow and immersed in LCL.

"Okay," she says, "We're sending you out first because you have the most functional experience with the Angels and we haven't been able to find Rei."

"Is she alright?" Shinji asks.

"We don't know," Misato says with a sigh, "But she's a tough girl. She

knows her job and she'll show up eventually. Ready?"

He nods.

"Good luck," says, wishing her words sounded sincere, "Eva launch!"

*

*

Plates slide out of place. If one could see far enough, one could look down the hole and stare all the way into the Cages. This would be a bad idea, however, as the Entrance plates sliding open means 15,000 tons of giant robot is heading your way via electric railway. Alarms blare, rails flash, and the carriage carrying the purple and green giant stops at the surface as the great form of the Seventh Angel clears the mountains surrounding Tokyo-3.

"Angel's in visual," Shinji announces, a 20 story skyscraper rising next to him and opening into an armory, "Let's see…okay, rocket launcher!"

Grabbing the massive tube, Unit 01 rests the end on its shoulder, a sight folding out of Shinji's chair and resting over his eye.

"Shinji, we have no idea what its offensive or defensive capabilities are," Yui says in his ear, *"Engage it from extreme range only."*

Targeting crosshairs lineup. The whine in Shinji's ear sounds with the lock on the missile on the Angel. A small grin crosses his face, and with nary a thought, he depresses the trigger. Unit 01 shakes with the launch vibration, stumbling back as the missile larger than most conventional military aircraft fires out, breaking into supersonic speed as it crosses the distance and slams into the blue crystal.

The explosion blossoms out, cracking the hull of the Angel and sending pieces of blue crystal raining down. Shinji allows himself a grin, telescoping through the launcher's sights…

And watches the crystal knit itself back in. Through the crystal, he can see something, to, a pair of shapes and eyes. A view which is obscured when the entire bulk of the Angel turns at him.

A point of light appears at the edge of the diamond. The entire form shatters, becoming a horizontal cylinder of spinning blue plate with a red sphere at the center. Light gathers at the point, lancing out the

distance and painting the chest of Unit 01 with a gentle pink glow.

In the Entry Plug, Shinji allows himself a moment to realize exactly what is about to happen.

"Oh, sh-"

*

*

The light blasts out of the opposite end of the Angel before blasting into a massive wave of light. Between the Angel and the Evangelion, anything standing vaporizes, before the blast hits Unit 01 full on.

In Central Dogma, they can only watch as the blast hits, the paint already starting to peel as the armor begins to heat up. Then, comes the scream. Yui's eyes go wide as her son screams in pain, in agony, his synch score coming back to bite him on the ass as he feels Unit 01 getting roasted alive by the Angel.

"Cut the connections!" she shouts.

"We can't!" Maya yells, "The blast fried all external receivers! The platform's been melted!"

"Fine, then!" Misato screams, "Eject the entry plug!"

"Signals are being rejected! We can't even get any commands in through the power line!"

*

*

He screams. His entire body feels like it's on fire, the LCL around him boiling. He can feel the Eva scream, to. Pain, real pain, not just like when the Angel broke his arm or when the Eva got whacked in the ribs. His mind is burning, his throat raw, and now he realizes he's been screaming for nearly a minute and a half and-

Then blackness.

The eyes of the Evangelion glow yellow. Falling to its knees, it slams both fists into the pavement, splintering concrete and rending steel

before the block around the Eva outlines with detonating explosives. The entire block, the intersection of the street, lurches before splintering and falling away, metal plates sliding into place to mask the entryway into the Geofront from the advancing Angel.

In the plug, as his heart begins to slow to a stop, Shinji watches as if dreaming as the great ceiling of Geofront falls away. His hands leave the butterfly controls, hanging in the weightless freefall as his eyes close…

And the entire Entry Plug jerks as Unit 01 impacts on the Geofront.

*

*

At six years old, Shinji was a little shorter than most boys his age, but not so much so to stand out. In fact, he blended in really well, something which he prided himself in. People were less likely to pick on someone who didn't stand out, after all. Why attack a crowd than attack the ones who trailed ahead or behind?

Mom was still walking with a cane, and his father had no expression, and they were helping him get settled in with Uncle and Aunt. Mom and Father were both busy, after all, and they couldn't take care of him. Besides, Father told him, Mom had already been badly hurt, and neither of them wanted to think about what would happen if he was hurt, too.

"What happened to her? I remember…"

Bathroom door slams open. Father's face turns white. Ambulance arrives, Professor Fu at the hospital, Father getting held back from attacking the Doctor. Aunt Naoko screaming something at Father, Father yelling back.

Mom was crying, harder than they've ever seen her cry. She wouldn't let go of Shinji when he was brought into the room, telling them-

Lying on the field of grass, the sun shines white above him. His breath is caught in his throat. His mind is wandering, memories flashing in front of his eyes.

"-ardiac massage in three, two-"

The world shifts. He feels the ground move. He must have died, and

now they're trying to bring him back. That explains the memories. His life is flashing before his eyes.

"What if I die?" he asks aloud.

"Then Unit 01 will be useless," the voice responds, "NERV will have no hope of destroying the Angel. Everyone will die. Do you want that?"

A flash. A small smile, blue eyes.

"No."

"Then *get up."*

*

*

His eyes open with a start. Taking a deep breath, he winces. His skin is sensitive and pink. Remembering the lecture about synchronization, but remembering the LCL feeling like it was boiling, he carefully props himself onto his elbows, scanning the infirmary recovery room. Same tv bolted on the wall, same chairs and cabinets. His gaze wanders over towards the door, and finally the chair next to his bed.

Hands clasped together, shoulders shaking as she breathes, Asuka gives off a relieved smile as he slowly, painfully, returns it.

"Hey," he groans.

"H-hi," she responds, "Y-you were out f-for three hours."

He nods.

"Y-you were c-clinically d-dead for fifteen minutes," she continues, fingers trembling on the hem of her dress, "Unit 01 p-prevented brain d-death, and w-we're not sure how. And the Angel is p-parked topside, so we can't g-get out, and…"

Tears start streaming down. Clenching her eyes shut, gritting her teeth, she goes silent, arms wrapped around her as Shinji tries to sit up but finds the varied monitors he has been hooked up to preventing such an act.

"Asuka," Misato says, standing in the doorway, "I need to speak with Shinji. Dr. Ikari could use your help."

"Yes, ma'am," Asuka softly says, and walks out.

She watches the girl going, sighing as she turns back to him. Walking, she drapes her bomber jacket on the chair before sitting down, folding her hands as she leans forward and grins.

"She was at your side the moment you came in," Misato says, "Well, the moment your mother let visitors in. I don't know how, I don't know why. I'd say it's because you're her boss's son, but that would be a bit too cynical, and I honestly don't know Asuka well enough."

He nods, lying back on the bed.

"So," she says, "We're putting together a plan to kill the Angel."

He nods, again.

"You almost got fried," Misato continues, "Asuka wasn't kidding. Your heart stopped for fifteen minutes, and you were basically dead. Unit 01 kept you…preserved for lack of a better word, and we brought you back. If it were up to me, you'd never be in that thing. But we don't control who can pilot. We just make sure the Angels die."

"Why do you hate the Angels?" he asks.

She sighs, resting her elbows on her knees, leaning forward. A small chuckle escapes her lips, and leaning back, crossing her legs, she rolls her head back and smiles.

"Well…there's a reason. Have time to hear it?"

"I can't get out of the bed, if that's what you're asking."

"Good…well, let me tell you why…"

*

*

"So, in short, the Angel is parked in the center of Tokyo-3, using a part of itself as a corkscrew drill, and we have…five hours until it breaks through."

Sipping her coffee, Yui clicks the remote, the display of above-ground Tokyo-3 converting to the armor plates.

"Give me a status report," she says.

"The Angel's penetrated the first two armor layers," Lieutenant Aoba states, the image shifting back to the Angel itself, "From what we can see, the Angel operates using a Kill Zone, or a static surrounding area that, if something enters or it is attacked, creates an attack response in the form of a high powered particle beam."

"So our main option," Maya adds, "Is to attack it from outside its kill zone. Unfortunately, the Angel's kill zone surrounds all of metropolitan Tokyo-3 and most of the far-distance launch sites. It will attack if we send any Eva to the surface alone."

"So we need a distraction," Yui says, sipping her coffee again, "Where is Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi?"

"With the Pilot."

Standing in the doorway, Asuka nods, avoiding her mother's gaze as she walks in.

"Pilot Ikari has woken up, Doctor Sohryu," she says, "Katsuragi is with him. She is briefing him on Operation Yashima."

"Thank you, Asuka," Yui says, affording the girl a smile, "Let's go over the basics. Dr. Akagi?"

"The JSSDF loaned us a prototype positron cannon last year to test," the brunette doctor says, puffing her cigarette, "With everything else, we never got around to completing it, but we can retrofit it to be fired by an Evangelion. One of the Evas will be on sniping duty. The other will serve as a distraction."

Yui nods, hands folded behind her, gaze focused on Kyoko's face which sports the small beginnings of a smile.

"Okay," she says, "And on Dr. Sohryu's recommendation, Unit 02 is on sniper duty. Unit 01 will be equipped with the heat shields to distract the Angel while Unit 02 takes the kill shot. Has Section 2 turned up any evidence of Rei?"

"None so far," Makato sighs, "No response from her phone or GPS tracker. She's just disappeared."

"Very well," Yui says, bracing on the table, "Begin final preparations. We launch in four hours, thirty minutes. Asuka?"

No response. The door swings.

"Damn it."

*

*

Hands clenching and unclenching, she walks down the hall. Jaw set, teeth clenched, daggers of pain shoot up her mouth, but she fights it back like she always does.

Find him. She needs to find him. Her mother just sent him out to die and she has to find him.

"Asuka!"

Uriel runs down the hall, wide toothy smile on his face. Already in his plug suit, his connectors in his hand, his shoulders are rolled back and he carries himself with pride.

"Uri?" she quietly asks.

"Mother and I convinced the Doctor to give me a chance," he announces, arms out and wide, "And instead of distraction duty, I will be the one to destroy the Angel! It looks like *I* may be catching to your 'boyfriend,' hm?"

Her lip trembles. Hands tightly clenches, her eyes go wide as saucers at his proud, arrogant grin.

"W-w-what?"

"Well, we *will* be tied on experience killing Angels," he laughs, "Although I will need two more to match Ikari's. Still, I prove myself here and I'm not far off. Don't you think?"

Her breathing goes ragged, the gears of her mind grinding as the situations gravity sets in. He notices her pallor, his smile dropping slightly.

"Asuka?" he asks, "Are you alright?"

He reaches out towards her. She flinches, backing away, as if struck.

"Don't *touch me,"* she growls. His face twists in confusion.

"Asuka, I thought you would be proud of this."

He reaches out again, grabbing her by the arms. Shoulders shake, teeth grind, and she screams, pushing him back. Eyes bloodshot and puffy, her hands clench and unclench, glaring at him with ferocity he's never seen before.

"Proud?" she asks, "I should be *proud* of you?"

Eyes meet his. Her voice becomes loud, shrill. *Terrified.*

"You sent him out to *f__ing DIE!"* she screams, "Don't you *F__ING touch me!"*

He never sees her hand move. One moment it was at her side, the next moment he is almost sent to the floor from the force and rage behind her slap, stumbling to the wall with a grunt.

"You *monster!"*

Looking up, he catches a small glimpse of her as she turns the corner and disappears, running. Running the entire way.

Wincing as he touches the cheek, he is relieved to find no blood. It may bruise, but it will heel. He will simply say he tripped and fell. Mother need not know the specifics.

After all, he doesn't want to see his sister hurt.

*

*

Dousing the cigarette on the ash tray, Ritsuko groans as she braces her hands on the holographic display. Dr. Ikari and Dr. Sohryu have already left, leaving the junior partner of the 'Bitches of Eastwick' as they are informally known to figure out the fine details of their plan to save the world. If anything, the younger Dr. Akagi appreciates that she is so often overshadowed by the two if only because it affords her anonymity.

"The plan looks workable, Sempai," Maya says, snapping her out of her musings, "Remember how you said we'd need all the power in Japan to power the cannon?"

"I vaguely recall, yes," Ritsuko says with a smirk.

"Well, I went ahead and set up a system," she says, "We can remote control all the major substations along the Japan coast to redirect electricity to a series of transformers right outside Tokyo-3. The power lines are already set up, and we'd need about…three minutes to connect the major transceivers to the cannon once it's top side."

"Meaning Shinji has three minutes as the Angel's target," Ritsuko sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose, "The heat shield we have from the decommissioned Space Shuttle is not lasting that long."

Maya nods, touching the hologram of the Angel and pulling it down, expanding it to a two dimensional fold out. Stroking her chin, clicking her tongue, Maya carefully examines the system before her with the precision eye which is the exact reason Ritsuko argued to hire her in the first place.

"Wait…Sempai, I think you should see something."

Touching the image and drawing her hand up, it zooms in. The two stand close, leaning over it, staring. On the side of the Angel, the smooth, flawless blue crystal wall, Ritsuko spots it.

The basic outline of a face.

And red eyes.

"Oh my God," Ritsuko says, a grin splitting her face, *"There* she is!"

Turning to Maya, grinning, she takes her PDA and presses a button. A copy of the image appears on the screen, and with a laugh, she tightly hugs her assistant. Maya's face turns beat red Ritsuko laughing as she pats her on the bad.

"I'm bringing this to Dr. Ikari," Ritsuko says, "Good work, Maya. You just found *Rei!"*

Ritsuko runs out, leaving Maya standing in the room by herself. Slowly, tentatively, she brings her hands up and clasps them together. And with a joyous squeal, she tips back and collapses.

*

*

Silence. Floating in a sea of blue, but he's not sure that blue is water.

"Um…Rei?"

"Mm hm?"

"Rei…where are we?"

A small chuckle/giggle.

"We're inside the Angel."

More silence. Clicking of her tongue as she gathers her thoughts. Looking up, down, around, only blue.

"Oh my God," Kensuke says, "I've been *eaten by an Angel!"*

More silence. The strangled breathing becomes laughter.

"And it transforms! I've been eaten by a Transformer! I *always knew* I'd go like this! I can *die happy!"*

*

*

"…so, the story behind Second Impact is that seventeen years ago, an asteroid the size of a VW Beatle hit Antarctica at about half the speed of light. It vaporized Antarctica, flooded coastal cities, and the resulting environmental damage and wars killed half the human race. Now, this is *bullshit."*

Leaning forward in the chair, Misato grins as Shinji sits up on his bed, legs folded Indian style as he listens attentively.

"I know, because I was there," she says.

"You were," he asks, eyes going wide, "How? How did you…"

"My father," she interrupts, "Shiro Katsuragi, PhD. Brilliant, charismatic…and a shitty father. My parents never divorced, but no one could tell they were married from how they acted, and…well, eventually we badgered my father into doing something with me. So, he relented, and decided to take me on one of his great and many research expeditions."

Sipping the bottle of water in her hand, Misato's gaze turns thoughtful. Regretful. Mournful.

"I don't know what caused it," she says, "Second Impact. I know it wasn't a meteor or asteroid. But, when it hit the fan, I was unconscious. So, Dad carried me to the only working escape pod, and put me in. I came to just as the blast wave vaporized him, sealed the thing shut, and threw me out to sea."

Reaching into her dress, she holds up the white, cross-shaped pendant.

"He gave me this," she says, "Right before he died. I was told that whatever happened in Antarctica also…woke the Angels. So in a way, the Angels are responsible. For Second Impact. My father's death. So… maybe it's vengeance, and I shouldn't drag you into this. But if we do nothing, the other half of humanity goes down the drain."

A small, wistful smile on her face. The ticking clock on the wall counts down seconds, as she stands and squeezes his shoulder.

"Let's get going," she says, "We save the world in just under four hours."

*

*

The cup of coffee is light with cream and an unhealthy amount of sugar, but tastes like honey on her tongue. Sitting across from him in the NERV cafeteria, the shaking of her shoulders slowly, steadily relaxes. The tremors and shakes go away, in time. Maybe because of the drink, maybe because of the company. He found her right when she started to hyperventilate, helping her calm herself down before taking her to the cafeteria. She hopes she hasn't gotten in trouble with Dr. Ikari, but he reassured her that she understood.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

She looks up at the stoic, bearded visage across from her.

"A…little better."

"Really?" Gendo Ikari asks.

"N-no."

She sighs, staring into the coffee as if it held the secrets of the universe. Closing her eyes, bowing her head, her teeth clatter as she takes a shaky, unsure breath. Hands folded in front of him, the Supreme Commander of NERV nods his head, a small grin appearing on his face.

"You're worried about him," he says.

She nods, digging her nails into her palms.

"We wouldn't send him out to die," he says, "We will do everything in our power to make sure he comes home. This will not be easy, though. And if he is worried about you, I think he will not be able to focus."

She looks up, eyes red and puffy, hands shaking as she tries to wrap them around the cup.

"I will admit," Gendo says, "That no one here has given the children the attention they deserve. I will admit that the way Doctor Ikari and I sent Shinji to live with his relatives while we raised Rei could have been done better. I will admit that most of the time I give off the impression I want nothing to do with either of my children. But that is simply who I am. I do not know your mother, your brother, or you, so I cannot say whether we are the same or different. But let me ask you, why are you so concerned with him?"

Her mouth opens and closes, trying to find the proper word.

"Um…b-because he's n-nice to me," she says.

"Elaborate."

Her hands twist, a small, small smile crossing her lips.

"Because he stood up to my mother," she says, "Because he convinced Miss Katsuragi to let me live with them. Because he doesn't hold stupid things I do against me. Because he introduced me to his friends."

Her cheeks flush red, her smile a little wider.

"B-b-because he says I'm pretty," she says, softer, "Because he likes having me around."

"Shinji is not good at making friends," Gendo says, hands folded, face thoughtful, "That he has extended his hand to you means he does

consider you a friend. If you wish to help him, you should talk with him before he leaves."

She nods. Sliding the chair behind her, she stands, bowing respectfully.

"Thank you, Commander," she says, "I hope Doctor Ikari isn't upset with me."

"She is," he says, "Go."

She walks out, quickly. Sighing, he takes off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Checking his watch, grimacing, he stands. One hour left.

He really hopes he won't have to bury his son.

*

*

The Entry Plug spins into place. Grunting, Uri fixes the connectors to his hair, seizing the butterfly controls and closing his eyes. The presence inside probes and pushes, as it is wont to do. Gritting his teeth, he drives it back, and lets his mind seize control.

"Synchronization holding at 54%. Unit 02 activated."

The great machine lurches as it stands upright, locked into place in its carriage as they prepare to move him to the elevator. Focusing through the optics, he raises an eyebrow, magnifying on the image of the catwalk in front of Unit 01's Cage. He sees his sister and the Third, activating a connection to nearby mics to listen in.

"B-be careful," Asuka says, *"Come back from this. Okay?"*

"I'll…I," Shinji says, and smiles, placing his hands on her arms, *"I will. I will."*

A smile passes between the two, and he breaks off, walking to his Entry Plug as Asuka walks back into the lifts to Dogma. Cutting the connections to the mics and turning back to the tasks at hand, he closes his eyes and waits. He really *does* have to talk with Ikari about his sister…

*

*

"Sooo…"

"Yes, Rei?"

"I've been thiiiinking."

"About?"

Silence, clicking of her tongue.

"Stuff."

A sigh.

"Rei, that's not really making much sense…"

"I know."

A sigh, soft, maybe a little sad.

"I don't make much sense."

"Well, that's…okay, you have a point. We really have trouble…Rei, do you know why we…well, why we avoid you?"

"Because I don't make much sense."

"Kind of…I tend not to, either."

He sighs, resting his 'head' on his 'hands.' She is silent, and because of the non-existence of their state, he can't tell her mood.

"It's fun, isn't it?"

"What is, Rei?"

"Not making sense. I like it. Lets me go places."

"Such as?"

"Here. Have you ever been eaten by an Angel?"

"No…are we getting out of this?"

"Mm-hm. But you have to promise something…"

"Or I go to jail?"

"Mm-hm."

"…okay. What?"

"Are you afraid of heights?"

Silence. He 'nods.'

"Too bad."

*

*

The screen in Central Dogma lights up. A full three dimensional image of the Angel appears; the 'drill' that its lower part has become almost breached to the last three armor layers.

Misato growls under her breath as Kaji steps up next to her, raising an eyebrow and chuckling.

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

"Observing," he responds, "Special Inspector, remember? Aaaand, I'm here for the JSSDF. They're going to deploy a nice surprise for NERV which should help?"

"Tanks?"

"Oh, no," he says, and clicks his watch, a display appearing showing a phone symbol, "Chief, this is Agent. Commander and Doctor Ikari have approved of deployment. Get Rusty and Big Guy prepped."

*

*

"Rusty, this is CinC. The Ball is filled with the Link Goo and we have a green light for deployment. Get inside and let's get moving."

Climbing into the empty compartment at the top of the giant robot's head, she flips open a switch next to the ladder. Underneath her, a circular plate irises and opens into a tub of blue, thick slime. Based on

the properties of NERV's LCL, she sighs, makes sure her filters are working, and dives in.

The iris closes after her, sucking out the air. It serves as a connection liquid and as a shock absorber. Because she is going to be getting one *hell* of a shock soon. Twisting in the spherical chamber, she swims through the thick, syrupy liquid into the raised chair at the center, sidling into the seat and flattening her back.

Wires snap out, connecting to the shoulders of her armor, as raised red connectors reach from the folds of the cushions to connect with open receiver ports in the small of her back. Resting her hands on the edges of the armrests, the spherical handholds glow in tune with the slits on her armor. The opaque screen in front of her flashes, blurs, and reveals the launch bay.

"Bio-Link established," the soft female voice announces, *"Meta Encapsulated Granule Awareness System: ONLINE. Preparing Launch Sequence. T-Minus: 3 minutes until Catapult charged."*

*

*

"Eva Launch!"

Sudden acceleration, a grunt, and Unit 01 is topside once again. Gripping the hollowed out Space Shuttle in its hands, it begins running. In the distance, the great blue Diamond turns, the drill hesitating as it rises, and its skin begins to fracture.

In the Entry Plug, Shinji grits his teeth and digs the heels into the ground, just as confirmation is given of Unit 02 reaching the surface.

The Angel shatters, reforming into a massive spear. Pink light gathers at the spear tip before lancing out and hitting the shield full on. Grunting, feeling his hands burn, Shinji orders the Eva to bend its knees, press its shoulder against the shield, and press on. One step at a time, one motion at a time. He hears the orders as Uri connects the power to the Positron Cannon, grinds his teeth against the pain, remembers his promise.

He *will* make it home.

He *will* make it home.

"Firing sequence in three…two…one!"

The barrel tip of the cannon flashes, the city behind it going dark before lancing out into a beam of perfect blue, passing the distance in the fraction of a second towards the heart of the Angel of Thunder-

And washing against a hexagonal field.

"It's AT field's still up," Shinji says, eyes going wide as the molten shield falls to the ground.

*

*

"Oh, no," Yui whispers, eyes going wide in Dogma, "Get them back. This isn't working!"

Whirling, she turns on Kaji and Misato, pointing to the unshaven man.

"We need your backup, *right now!"*

"Still one minute to charge," he growls, "They don't have that long, do they?"

From her station, Maya turns as power meters on the screens rise to capacity.

"The Angel's charging it's primary weapon!"

*

*

The Angel breaks apart again, three great blue prongs surrounding a cube surrounding the red core. Light surrounds it, gathering at two points, pointed at both Evas. In the Entry Plug, Shinji's breathing goes shallow. He is *not* going to survive this. His mind flashes towards the funeral, assuming anyone survives long enough to give one. He flashes towards the crying crowds, towards his mother weeping, towards Asuka…

It's AT Field is still up…the Angel uses an AT Field and…drops it when firing. It can't raise the AT Field and fire at the same time.

Knuckles, white, grip the controls. His eyes glow in tune with the circle on his chest as the computer clicks off his Synch ratio rising. Unit 01 thrusts out its hands and the sky turns purple, the light gathering around Ramiel dispersing like sand in a storm. Advancing, digging heels into the ground and streets, a small grin crosses his face as the AT Field of Unit 01 and the AT Field of Ramiel come into contact with each other.

*

*

"He's forcing it into a tug of war," Ritsuko says, staring at the numbers reading off of Maya's console, "It can't fire it's weapon while it has to keep its AT Field up!"

"Problem is," Kyoko growls, "It has a stronger field than either Evas. We need to bring it down to kill it."

Kaji checks his watch, grins, and wraps an arm around Misato's shoulder.

"Lucky for you, the JSSDF wants to solve that problem," he announces.

Kyoko growls, folds her arms, and glares at the agent.

"I fail to see how a few tank rounds can break down an AT Field."

"How about 35,000 tons of Giant Robot fired out of a rail gun at Mach 12?"

Maya taps her screen, brings up a calculator and does the math.

"That'll work!"

*

*

The sabot round closes around Jet Alone. Between the two great prongs of the electromagnetic rail gun jutting out of the orbiting station, she brings up the zoom display to find herself facing down the great diamond over Tokyo-3.

"Rusty, this is CinC. Catapult charged and target is locked on. Give the

word."

Underneath the helmet, suspended in liquid, and her mind linked to the Jet Alone Prime, she grins. This, she thinks, is the moment she's lived for.

"Launch me."

*

*

From the heavens, a thin beam of blue dances along the surface of Ramiel. The Angel, curious, distracted, turns its attention from the Imitations pestering it towards the gentle light. Expanding its Mind, it lets its senses wander into the upper atmosphere…

And then wisely brings them back. The diamond shatters, and forms into a block pointing upwards, concentrating its AT Field into a solid wall.

The clouds split, the air catches fire as if struck by flint, and a missile twice the size of an Evangelion drags clouds behind it as it slams into the AT Field. The ground shakes, windows in every building above ground shattering as the missile collapses and two gunmetal gray fists slams into the field.

The AT Field rips and shatters, Ramiel tilting back as the mecha kicks off of it and flies back.

Dazed, angered, the form of the Angel becomes a great diamond once again, a part in its middle for the Core as it concentrates its power. Rising, hovering, it gathers light upon its base. It is done playing, it is done defending and attacking. Now, it will strike, gathering its entire strength into a single blast to breach the Egg of Mother and annihilate the Lilim spawn below it-

"Heee-ey."

The Core rotates. Its Gaze comes upon two Lilim standing in the Cavity of its Heart. The Female hands her hands behind her and is smiling, rocking on her feet.

"What'cha doin'?"

The Male walks up next to her, staring upon the Core of Ramiel with open jaw.

"So…that's the Core of the Angel?" he asks.

Rei nods.

"Mm-hm."

"Aaaand we're inside it, right? This is, like, its container, right?"

"Yeeeep," Rei responds.

Kensuke scratches his chin, folds his arms, and smirks.

"And it can't do anything to us, right? From in here?"

"Nope."

The Core, the Mind, the Soul, lets its gaze wander over the two Lilim. It cannot destroy them from here, but they are no threat. In fact, as it scans over them and dismisses their presence, its gaze wanders to the Female, down to its very cells and…

OH, the Mind of Ramiel says.

"Sooooo, since I kind of dragged you along, you get to decide how I kill it."

Kensuke nods, and leans in, whispering in her ear. Her face goes from puzzled, to surprised, to finally with an ear-to-ear grin before she pulls Kensuke into a hug.

"I like you!" she shouts, "We're gonna have so much fun together!"

OH, Ramiel repeats.

Rei slams her foot down, forming a ramp from the Material of blue crystal. Trotting back, she cracks her knuckles, rolls her shoulders, and takes off in a run, running up the ramp and leaping towards the Core as it finds the proper word to pair with its previous thought.

SHIT.

Rei brings her fist back, one hand open and forward. The silence and whine of the AT Field wrapping around Rei's fist is broken by a mighty shout that lifts up the heavens.

"FAAAALCON-"

*

*

There is a flash of light and a quarter of Ramiel's core shatters, ejected from its side like a pissed off volcano. The Angel of Thunder lists, tipping forward as it drunkenly begins descending, the light vanishing from its bottom point as it begins scrapping along the rooftops of apartment buildings.

Inside Unit 02, the power meters read green, and with a thought the Red Evangelion picks up the Positron Cannon and aims it as Ramiel descends towards him.

"Got you," Uri growls, and depresses the trigger.

*

*

OO, the half-blasted away Mind of Ramiel slurs, **OO. THOUGHT HURT. CONFUSED. MAYBE INEBRIATED. REMEMBER FIST HITTING MIND AND PART OF MIND NOT BEING THERE.**

HEY.

WHAT IS THAT GOING AROUND ME.

IT IS COOL AND BREEZY.

HM.

I WILL CALL IT AIR.

AIR!

AND WHAT IS THAT COMING AT ME?

HM.

IT IS BIG. AND IT IS ROUND.

HM.

I WILL CALL IT GROUND.

GROUND!

AND WHAT IS THAT?

IT IS PRETTY AND IT IS BRIGHT.

I WILL CALL IT LIGHT!

I WONDER IF IT WILL BE MY FRIEND.

*

*

The blast of the Positron Cannon fills the cavity, hitting the Core dead on and vaporizing it. With the destruction of the Core, the entire form shrieks, folding in one itself, becoming a multi-pointed star, before shifting into a sphere, and then a cloud of mirrors before returning to the form of the closed diamond.

The back of Ramiel blasts out like a skull from a suicide bullet, and the entire form lists before dropping down in the heart of Tokyo-3.

Silence reigns, city quiet and blacked out. Then a pale fist punches out a section of one of the sides, and Rei walks out, Kensuke on her heels. An elevator lift disguised as a street vendor opens up, Yui coming out first, staring at Rei as she waves towards them.

"Sorry we're late," Rei calls out, "We got stuck in the Angel."

"That was f__ing *awesome!"* Kensuke screams, "We should do this again!"

Yui palms her face. Gendo walks up next to her, rubbing her shoulders with a small grin painting his features.

"She's made a friend," he says.

"God help us all," she sighs, "We need to finish the first draft of the 'Dear Mr. Aida, we're sorry for your loss' letter."

Next to her, Sub Commander Fuyutsuki sighs and smiles, a wistful

look on his face.

"Ah, young love and first crushes," he says, "If only I was sixteen again. And a woman."

*

*

Somewhere between Doctor Sohryu congratulating Uri on his first Angel kill and Asuka looking like she was ready to tackle Shinji, the pilot of the now kneeling Jet Alone climbed out. Climbing on top of the massive mecha's head and walking across the shoulder, she taps her foot and a metal line drops out and towards the ground. Grabbing it, she slides down it, landing in a crouch and walking towards the assembled NERV officers.

"Quite an entrance, pilot," Kaji says with a grin, walking to her and patting her on the shoulder.

"Thank you, Kaji," she responds, rolling her shoulders and letting her gaze wander over the assembled staff. The Commanders, the three chiefs of Project E, the Tactical Chief and the pilots. A nice welcoming committee, all considered.

"The JSSDF will be loaning Jet Alone Prime to NERV," Kaji explains, "As a sort of peace offering. With Jet Alone comes its pilot. Introduce yourself, kid."

Reaching up, she depresses two buttons on the base of the jaw. A hiss of steam escapes as the clamps holding the helmet release. She pull off the helmet and pulls back the black hood covering the top of her head. Red hair falls to her shoulders, blue-green eyes and an almost boyish face displayed before she clicks her heels together and brings her hand up in a salute by her brow.

"Captain Mana Kirishima, JSSDF," she says, "Reporting for Duty, Commander."

Chapter 9: A Typical School Day

With a spurt, the shower comes to life as the bathwater drains down the sinkhole. On Miss Kats…on Misato's suggestion, Asuka bought some shampoos and conditioners on her way back from NERV. Maybe it was to get everyone mind off of how close they all came to dying, yesterday. At least, she thinks, as the water runs over her, Dr. Ikari gave her the day off.

Misato didn't. Both of them complained. Shinji was louder about it. They just saved the world, he said, Don't they get a day off?

Sadly, they don't. She doesn't mind, though. Craning her neck, she turns under the nozzle. The back of her neck is still sensitive, after all these years. The skin is still thinner than it should be, from everything. Ritual takes over, and she rolls her shoulders, letting the water run down the grooves on her back and shoulders, her little secrets.

She doesn't mind it. She doesn't mind it here.

It can be scary, but at the same time…

*

*

A shriek, followed by things thrown across the bathroom. The door slides open, the inordinately large warm water penguin running/ waddling out before skidding the turn into the kitchen and into the freezer. Clad in a towel held up by her hand and willpower, Asuka skids into the kitchen entrance, as Misato sips a can of coffee and Shinji stares.

"Misato!" Asuka screams, "What as…what is-"

"That was Pen Pen," Misato says, "He's my…well, he's my other room mate. He doesn't come out a lot when it's warm, so you haven't met him yet."

Shinji stares, wooden spoon half submerged in the pot of miso.

"Okay," Asuka says, tying the towel around her and sweeping back her hair, "I-I'm going to f-finish showering. Is b-breakfast almost ready?"

"Yep," Misato responds, turning back to the newspaper, "Don't let it get cold."

Sliding sideways, she disappears behind the corner and the bathroom door once again closes. Humming to herself, Misato continues scanning the newspaper, before finally reaching out and snapping her fingers in front of Shinji's face.

He snaps back to awareness, and face red, turns back to preparing breakfast.

"Good man."

-

-

Chapter 9: The Typical School Day

-

-

The middle school uniforms are garish at best, and fetish fuel at worst. Consisting of a blue skirt, white blouse and thick suspenders, it became quickly obvious to the common watcher of the middle school that whoever designed those garish things were trying to emphasize the legs of the female students. When questioned about the design decisions, the tailors who thought up the school uniforms wisely avoided directly answering the question of 'why,' and very courteously apologized to Dr. Ikari before running for the next city.

The high school uniforms make a little more sense. A plaid skirt, white blouse, and blue blazer give an air of sophistication and a level of elitism despite the fact that every child of appropriate age in Tokyo-3 goes to the same school. This is partially because the population of Tokyo-3 is measured in the hundred thousands instead of millions, and also because every child of 16 and lower is a potential Eva pilot.

Red hair cut to the shoulders, green eyes alight and a smile on her face, the newest student hands her hands clasped behind her as she introduces herself.

"My name is Mana Kirishima," she says, "It's a pleasure to meet you all."

Walking from the front of the room, she takes the seat next to Asuka, grinning from ear to ear as the other girl shifts in her seat and returns it, more subdued. The teacher begins droning as Mana unpacks and opens up her laptop, loading up programs and blithely surfing the internet. Next to Asuka, Shinji half pays attention and half looks at email, and Asuka leans over, looking over her shoulder.

"Who's that?" she whispers.

"Ichi," he says with a grin, "An old friend. A pen pal of mine from a few years back."

She leans closer. He shifts in his seat as her hair falls over his hand, her head now blocking his view of the screen as he sits back and rolls his eyes. As she reads the email, his eyes wander down, catching something out of the corner. Through her thick mass of strawberry red hair, he catches a sight of something red, like part of a circle and…

"Ikari! Sohryu!"

The two look up. Squeaking, she sits ramrod straight as the two find themselves subject to the angry gaze of the teacher and the disappointed, annoyed glare of Hikari.

"I will not have you disturb this class," the teacher states, "If you are bored, mask it at least as well as Suzuhara does. Now step outside and hold the buckets!"

*

*

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be."

"I'm sorry I got us both into trouble."

"Really, you don't have to be."

"But I'm really sorry."

"I know."

"Really, I'm sorry"

"Heee~ey."

Asuka almost falls off the bench at the lunch table as the two pale hands fall on her shoulders. Sitting across from her, Shinji sighs and glares at Rei, who grins as she wraps her arms around Asuka's shoulders.

"What'cha doin'?"

"We're having lunch," he says, "Want to join us?"

Grinning, she sits next to Asuka, taking out her lunch bag and plopping a rolled mound of paper, dripping with something that he hopes he grease in front of her. Unwrapping it, Asuka watches with saucer large eyes as Rei tries to fit the subway sandwich completely in her mouth, much like how a snake detaches its jaw before swallowing prey whole.

Asuka turns back to her salad and fried fish, trying to zone out the sounds which are a cross between an enjoyable lunch and savannah predators digging into a gazelle.

"I hope we didn't get into too much trouble," she says, "I wouldn't want to make Hikari upset."

"I've seen her upset," Shinji says, "She isn't upset. So, what are you doing after school?"

"Well, Dr. Ikari doesn't need me today," Asuka says with a small smile, "So…I was just going to go back home and study."

"Me, Touji, and Ken were going to the arcade," he says with a shrug, "You're welcome to join us."

A pained, loud swallow, followed by an unwomanly belch. Shinji stares, Asuka shrinks, and Rei dabs the edges of her lip with a napkin before giving her stomach a satisfied pat. He has seen things. He has seen things that would boggle the mind. Never before, though, has he seen Rei eat. Scenes like this bring him a step closer to understanding why people have drinking problems.

"Heeeeeeeey," Rei says with a wide, toothy grin, "Soooooooooooooo you're free this afternoon?"

They both nod.

"That's greatastic!" Rei announces, clapping her hands together, "That means you can help me!"

Shinji and Asuka stare at each other, then back at Rei. Taking his life into his own hands as he does more and more these days, he sighs and speaks.

"With what?"

Rei grins. It is a pleasant, and yet at the same time horrifying sight. To lump the two together would involve explaining the fact that when Rei smiles, it is in a fashion that makes one wonder if she is about to go for your throat.

"Blackmail."

*

*

Previous night. Shinji and Misato are asleep, and even if she doesn't complain about it, both have realized that Asuka is not one to fall asleep easily or gently. Sitting on the bed in her pink nightgown, propped up on pillows with the doll in her lap, she sighs. It is not a dramatic sigh, or a sad sigh. It is just a sigh, as she once more tries to receive guidance from her oldest friend.

"I wonder…"

"About what?" the doll squeaks.

"If I'm so worried about him, does that mean I like him? And if I do, does he like me?"

"You can't always worry about that, Asuka! If you keep worrying about that, you'll just be a nervous wreck!"

Another sigh, Asuka running her fingers through the doll's stringy hair.

"That's true," she says, "I just wish I wasn't so useless around here. He cleans, he cooks. Miss Katsuragi's so busy she doesn't have time to do all the chores."

She sighs, hanging her head. Always going into that Black Place. That's what they call it, when she becomes so convinced of her own ineptitude that she becomes unable to act. Her keyword: Useless, the same word Mother always uses when she gets angry at her, how she's always a *useless little girl.*

"It's alright to spend time doing nothing," the doll squeaks, "But why don't you ask if there's something you can do?"

"If I do, he'll just smile, tell me he has it under control," she says, a small blush creeping on her cheeks, "He always does that. Why does he do that?"

"Why do you think he does?"

Her cheeks flush bright red.

"What do we call it when someone wants to wait on you hand and foot?"

They flush brighter, and with a small, unsteady smile, she lies back on the bed, holding the doll at arms length above her.

"Okay," she says, "Okay. Okay. Maybe."

She brings the doll down, hugging it close as heavy eyelids finally give way to days of exhaustion.

"Maybe."

*

*

The lift door opens, and Misato looks up from her PDA and the reports therein to gaze at the smiling, unshaven visage of her ex boyfriend as he walks in next to her. Sighing, she turns back to her display, cycling through estimated repair costs of an 800 foot high eight sided diamond crashing into the heart of Tokyo-3. In all honesty, the costs aren't *that* high, partially because the Angel had the courtesy to crash on the release spots of two high rise buildings, so it was quickly raised, tied up, and moved to the Geofront.

Well, it is large and could be hollowed out.

Maybe they could use it as a secondary base.

"So," Kaji says.

"So," Misato responds.

He sways back and forth on his feet.

"I understand you're not living alone," she says, "Hot girl on the side?"

"No," he says, shoulders slumping, "Just Mana. I'm her guardian."

"Mm hm."

"I've earned a lot of nicknames, Katsuragi. I'm trying to avoid adding 'scumbag' to the list."

"And pedophile. Don't forget that."

"Uh-huh," he says, and grins, "Cold spell's still going on? Did I spoil you for other men?"

"I apparently didn't do a good enough job breaking you in," she sighs, "My mistake."

Hand comes over the PDA, easing it down as he turns her to him. A grin, the *grin* on his face, the look of knowing *something* that lets him disarm a woman with a look and undress them with a smile.

"You know what I missed?" he asks, "Ditching work just to fool around with you. The fun, the spontaneity. Messing around just to mess around."

She grins, a smirk becoming an almost laugh as her hands wander down, towards the belt of his loose fitting uniform.

"And do you know what I missed?" she asks, low and purring.

He chuckles, victory in his grasp…

And his eyes go wide and cross as something else comes into hers.

"Setting your shit *on fire."*

*

*

The lift doors open. Lieutenant Hyuga Makato steps out of the way as Misato marches past, checking her PDA as she continues on her way towards Central Dogma. Staring after her for a moment, he turns to the lift to find Special Inspector Kaji leaning against the cab's railing, one hand between his legs and breathing heavily.

Shakily, releasing his aching man parts, Kaji raises a hand and gives the confused lieutenant a shaky thumbs up.

"Worth it."

*

*

Skidding to a stop around the corner, Shinji looks around, stares at the students filing too and from the school library, and swears.

"Damn it!"

Pumping his legs, he runs down the hallway, muttering curses to himself. This is bad, he thinks. This is very bad. Somehow, she gave him the slip and is God knows where. He doesn't want to think about what she has planned.

"Trouble?"

Skidding to a stop, he stares, blinks, and grabs Kensuke by the lapels of his shirt.

"Rei just ran off with Asuka," he says, "She said something about *blackmail*. Did Rei tell you *anything*?"

Kensuke narrows his eyes. Scratching the back of his head, he clicks his tongue, face considerate. Snapping his fingers, he turns back to Shinji and shrugs.

"What's all this commotion? Shinji?"

Holding both sets of bags, Touji grunts and offers a weak wave as Hikari comes to a stop in front of the panicked young pilot. Eyes assessing the situation, the practiced Class Representative folds her arms, purses her lips, and seizes control.

"What happened?"

"Rei grabbed Asuka and disappeared," Shinji breathes, bent over, hands on his knees, "She said something about blackmailing someone. Hikari, who would Rei go after?"

"Go after?" Hikari asks, "Well…she was complaining about something to me the other day."

Shinji rolls his hand, grunting as a sign for her to continue. Sighing, rubbing the bridge of her nose, Hikari takes the hint as she glares at him.

"Okay," she says, "Before you arrived, there was the scare over another Angel, the one before the green one. Because of the scare, the parents protested about the safety of the school and the principal cancelled the Winter Solstice dance. Rei was upset because that would have been next week. Why, I don't know. But when I talked with her this morning, she said she had an idea about…'sweetening the pot.' Does that make sense?"

A pregnant pause, followed by the four students and friends staring at each other. Despite her proper presence and sense of decorum, it is Hikari who comes to the conclusion first, her eyes going wide and both hands darting to her mouth with an almost airless squeak in place of what should have been a terrified scream.

"Oh my *God!"* she whispers, "She wouldn't!"

"She would," Kensuke says, face turning pale as he nods, "This is Rei we're talking about. She would."

"Would what?" Shinji asks, grabbing Kensuke by the shoulders, "What is Rei doing? What is she going to do?!"

Hikari grabs Shinji by the shoulders, spinning him to her.

"She's going to sell Asuka to the principal to put the dance back on!" she screams, "This way!"

Grabbing him by the wrist, she runs, dragging him with her. Grumbling, Touji runs after, Kensuke close behind. Watching from around the corner, Mana raises an eyebrow. Raising her left wrist to her face, she taps the face of the watch, the digital display forming into the JSSDF logo and clicking onto a phone symbol.

"It's me," she says, "I need profiles of the pilots. Psyche, physical. Especially the Third and Sohryu's daughter. I think something's going on with them…"

*

*

Ritsuko Akagi looks up from her cup of coffee and status report for Unit 00 to find a pair of hands wrapping around her waist and a stubble laden jaw against the back of her neck. She doesn't mind, per se, but is amused that he still completely lacks the sense of decorum to leave the bedroom in the bedroom and the office in the office.

"You've lost weight," Kaji says.

"That's because I've been having round the clock sex with your ex girlfriend."

Eyebrow raises. His hands release as if burnt, and the door to the lab opens to find Misato leaning on the doorway, eyes narrowed and growling.

"Misato was right," Ritsuko says, turning back to her coffee, "You really are easy to f__ with."

"Very funny, Ritz," Misato grumbles, walking in and glaring at Kaji, "What do you need, Inspector?"

"Believe it or not, I'm here on business," Kaji says with a sigh, "Since Jet Alone's going to be housed in the Geofront, I had to drop off maintenance specifics with Ritsuko before I headed to the school to pick up Mana."

"Riiiight," Misato drones, "The feeling her up was an added bonus."

Ritsuko laughs, sharply, the brunette scientist turning back to the reports and snatching the folder out of Kaji's hand.

"I don't know who to get pissed at," Misato grumbles, "Kaji for hitting on you, or you for constantly bringing that up!"

Kaji raises an eyebrow. Pulling up a chair, he sits and puts his feet up on the lab table.

"Elaborate, please," he says with a grin.

"Misato's upset," Ritsuko says, taking the tone of a teacher to a small child, "Because I keep mentioning that time in college we both got reaaaally drunk and had sex."

Misato palms her face, groaning. Kaji goes silent, both eyebrows rising as far as they will go. Silently, his mind whirs, contemplating the information.

"I don't believe you," Misato mutters.

"Believe it or not, it happened," Ritsuko sighs, "You place too much importance on physical actions, Misato. I just like having blackmail material on you."

Sighing, she takes the folder, humming to herself as she grabs her coffee and walks out. Pausing in the doorway, she looks up, looks down, and finally takes Maya's shoulder and gently moves her to the side, walking past her and into the hallway.

*

*

Asuka was articulate, managing to keep her stutter under control during the entire presentation. Using her laptop and the phone lent to her by NERV, she used the built in projector to display the lower than expected costs of repair to Tokyo-3 due to the fact that two of the last four Angel attacks were well outside of city limits, and the last one only damaged a small section of the city.

Therefor, the expenses of insuring and protecting the school building for the event would easily be covered by the extra money in NERV's repair budget, thus allowing the dance to be held as on schedule.

The principal, a distinguished, older gentleman with receeding gray hair and a passing resemblance to Sub Commander Fuyutsuki, nodded patiently through the entire presentation. As Asuka concluded and turned off her phone, he nodded, stood, and also nodded towards Rei. Rei herself has kept quiet during the entire presentation, which should have had everyone worried. As the principal rises and comes out from behind his desk, he clears his throat and folds his hands behind him.

"You made excellent points, Miss Sohryu," he says, "I will consider them all. If you can get me in touch with someone in NERV's financial department, I can exchange numbers with them and see if this is

feasible."

She nods, bowing. Cheeks flush red as she smiles, pride welling inside her for a brief moment.

"I understand you're from Germany?" the principal asks.

"Y-yes," she responds.

"Well, you've done me the courtesy of adapting to my our culture," he says, and with a smile, extends his hand, "I believe this is how it is done in your homeland."

He walks forward, hand extended as she stands straight and beams.

Which is when the principal stumbles on Rei's extended foot, tripping forward with a yelp, lunging, and landing his hand on Asuka's busom. She turns beat red, squeaking in surprise as she seizes up. The door bursts open as Rei takes out her phone, points the lens and hits the red record button.

"Get your hands off of her!"

The principal, a man of pride, dignity, and education, allows himself a moment to realize exactly what has transpired before Shinji Ikari charges across the office and tackles him.

Hikari's eyes go wide. Touji's mouth drops open. Kensuke holds up his camera and records the whole thing.

*

*

Sunlight fading in the background, the First Child, Third Child, and Dr. Ikari's personal assistant sit in front of the desk of the Supreme Commander of NERV as Gendo Ikari tents his hands in front of his face and glares at them. Shinji's shirt collar is ripped and Asuka's face is still beat red. Rei, on the other hand, sits perfectly still with a contented smile on her face.

"So," Gendo says, "Care to explain?"

Silence as Shinji shifts in his seat, Asuka staring down at her tented hands.

"Would someone care to explain," Gendo repeats, "How Shinji ended up in a fight with the Principal of your high school?"

More silence. Asuka making a squeaking sound as her shoulders slump.

"Or," he continues, "Why the Principal refuses to press charges and insists that there was no incident? Or how, once the video of the scene ended up on the school website, the Vice-Principal and the *entire female population* of your year now insists on giving Shinji a commendation?"

More silence. Shinji coughing.

"Very well," Gendo says, shoulders sagging, "We will not speak of this again, like a bell that does not toll. NERV will sweep this under the rug. This will be forgotten. And nothing like this will be allowed to happen again…yes, Shinji?"

Raising his hand, Shinji rubs his brow and sighs.

"Father," he says, "What exactly did happen?"

Tented hands release. Gendo Ikari braces his elbows on the table and rests his face in both hands.

"I have no idea," he groans, "Dismissed."

*

*

Misato had nothing. After the entire car ride home, where she managed to be subdued, follow every traffic law, and not yell at a single person, she had nothing. No grand speeches about how she expected better from Shinji, because in all honestly she would encourage this. If someone had made an unwanted move on the girl, she would have encouraged him to kick their ass. She would have encouraged him to use a crowbar.

Thankfully, it was all a matter of misread intentions, so no one stayed angry at each other.

Still, she had nothing. She only hopes the embarassment of the situation and whatever the Commander said to him with chastisement

enough, because in all honestly she had nothing she could add to the conversation.

"We're home," she deadpans as the door opens, Pen Pen already peaking out of his fridge, "Pen Pen! Beer me!"

Shinji watches as the penguin somehow manages to do just that, wondering how the family pet has managed to develop the articulation in its fins to handle beer cans and work the refrigerator. Turning just as Asuka's door closes, he sighs, walks to the living room, and slumps down onto the couch.

"Hey there, kids!"

The beer can crunches, Misato turning from the kitchen to the open doorway just to level a murderous glare at Kaji. Leaning in next to him, Mana smiles, waving.

"Hey, there, neighbors!"

Dropping the metal ball that was the beer can in the trash, Misato levels her eyes on the eternally smiling agent and snarls.

"What?"

"We're two doors down," Kaji responds, "You know, getting the pilots to bond, since Mana and Shinji will be working together from hereon in. How does that sound?"

"F__ing dandy," she growls, "That's all, right? You're just here to mess with me, right? Because we've had a long day."

"Yeah, rumors about Ayanami trying to pimp out Sohryu's daughter got around," Mana says with a grin, "And Ikari's valiant attempt to save her honor. He's going to have to beat off date requests with a stick."

Misato raises an eyebrow. She motions for her to continue, leaning on the table.

"Well, they put the dance back on," Mana says with a shrug, "From what I understand, it's a combination of it being financially feasible and blackmail material of the principal. So expect a lot of girls to be trying to corner Ikari."

Misato turns to tease him, just to find the couch already empty.

"Well, crap," she sighs.

Turning to find Kaji already sitting, with Mana leaning on the wall with her arms folded, she finally pulls over a pillow and sits down.

"Not here just to mess with us, right?"

"Nope," Kaji says, "You're fourth in charge of NERV, Katsuragi. So you're cleared high enough to see this. Mana, show her."

*

*

Propped up against the back of the bed, doll cradled in her lap, Asuka rests her head against the wall and sighs.

"What a day," she says, "What a day what a day what a day what a day. What do I make of this, hm? What do I make of how he acts?"

"I think he likes you," the doll squeaks, "That's why he was so eager to help you!"

"He does, doesn't he? Do you really think he does?"

"Would he have charged him if he didn't?"

"No…"

She sighs, hugging the doll close.

"Oh," she moans, "I don't mind that Rei used me. Is that alright? That I don't mind what Rei did?"

"Why is that?"

"Because she has a use for me," Asuka sighs, "It's not wrong, is it? Is it?"

She lies back, a smile coming over her face. A long smile, blue eyes glinting in the moonlight as the lights shut down. Sighing, hugging the doll close, she lets her eyes droop slowly, humming to herself.

The door opens slightly, Shinji peaking in. He isn't sure why he does this. He isn't sure why he is doing this. He isn't sure why he does this. He isn't sure if this is creepy or sweet.

Still, he had to make sure she was alright. Concern, at its basic sense, is what drives him, and maybe more. A small smile comes to his face as he closes the door, walking into the room set aside for him and walking to his laptop.

Opening the computer, scanning over the email, he smiles to himself as he opens the latest message from Ichi.

"I heard you had a busy day," the message reads, "I saw the video. Why did you attack the principal? Because of her?"

"Yeah," he writes back, "I don't like seeing her hurt, I guess. I don't know how to put it otherwise."

He sends the message, and it is with no surprise that an email comes right back.

"You are not open with your feelings. Neither is she. It will not serve either of you to dance around the subject."

Holding his head, Shinji groans. Clicking off a reply about how everyone seems to know his feelings better than he does, he clicks off the computer and stumbles off to bed. Clicking off the lights and folding his hands behind his head, he watches the spinning ceiling fan as he tries to sleep.

"I really need to get a new SDAT player…"

*

*

The door the Ikari apartment opens, and Rei comes face to face with the glare of Hikari Horaki. The class representative folds her arms, narrowing her eyes as Rei grins, tipping back and forth on her heels.

"So," Hikari says, "You mislead everyone. You brought along Asuka to shore up her own sense of self-worth, giving her a chance to show actual competance. However, the way you brought her along gave Shinji the impression you were planning something unseemly."

"Yep."

"Additionally," Hikari continues, "You then played to the Principal's pride, tripped him to put him in a compromising position, and then

took pictures of him groping Asuka, as well as Shinji attacking him, in order to blackmail the Principal to put the dance back on."

Rei nods, grinning wider.

"So," Hikari says, "Asuka now has an even higher opinion of Shinji, having seen him attack someone to defend her. He is also now practically worshipped by the female population of our class, which means when those two show up as a pair, she is going to be envied by *everyone."*

"More or less," Rei says, stretching her hands above her head, "What do you think, Hikari?"

Hikari's face splits in a grin.

"I think our plan worked brilliantly."

Chapter 10: The Melancholy of Ayanamei Rei

As dawn arrives and the morning alarms sound, Asuka wnet through her quick morning routine and dressed. After that, she found herself in the kitchen, to find her guardian angrily whacking the side of her PDA and breathing a strung together series of epithets at the on-paper innocent piece of technology.

"Something w-wrong?" Asuka asks.

"Doctor Ikari wants my feedback on a report," Misato growls, "Problem is, the damn thing's on a minidisc and my p.o.s. PDA won't read it!"

Sipping her canned coffee and scowling, the tactical commander for NERV starts banging the side of the delicate piece of electronic hardware against the table.

"C-can I look?"

Sighing, shrugging, Misato tosses the PDA to her. Catching it, Asuka narrows her eyes and examines the interior, before peering in the slit on the side. A small, confident smile appears, as she gently lets it down on the table and takes out a metal double rectangle from her pocket.

"I can fix this," she says.

Snapping out the multi-tool into a screwdriver, and quickly unscrews the four major bolts on the back, laying them down before gently working off the transparent viewscreen face and easing off the white, flate white connection wires. Circuit boards are set aside and put in an order she has in mind, before the tiny optical drive is gingerly lifted from the array.

Easing the minidisc out, she gently blows on the dim laser inside, flipping the multi-tool and revealing a q-tip which she uses to probe the crevice.

The optical drive goes in first, followed by the circuit boards. Re attaching every connector, she eases the display back on before swiftly fastening the screws back into place.

Humming some tune to herself, she brings up the display, tapping at it

as Misato watches in dumb shock, her coffee half forgotten in her hand.

"There," Asuka announces, "Done! I also linked the PDA's GPS feature to a map of NERV-1 you had in the trash sectors of the hard drive, so you don't get lost anymore."

Taking the PDA as offered from Asuka, she examines the map and nods. Looking up, staring at Asuka, she takes a long drag from her coffee and blinks.

"Asuka," she says, "How did you just do that?"

The girl lets off a shaky smile, sitting across from Misato.

"I'm…good with machines."

-

-

Chapter 10: The Melancholy of Ayanami Rei

-

-

Conversations at the Katsuragi apartment were awkward for the most part since Shinji made himself something of a celebrity in his chivalrous act. So, she decided to sneak out early today. She had been lagging behind on her job at NERV with Dr. Ikari, and it was Saturday, so she decided to get some extra hours in.

Sitting on the tram leading to NERV-1, she watches the plates go by to reveal the Geofront below. Sighing, Asuka stares at her bag, dressed plainly in jeans and a sweater, once more alone with her thoughts despite being surrounded by people. Well, that was the plan.

"Asuka?"

Looking up, she forces a faint smile as Maya sits next to her.

"Hi," the other assistant to the Power Trio of NERV says, "Heading in early?"

"Y-yes," Asuka says, and sighs, "It's been a-awkward lately. I d-decided to get some extra h-hours."

"Mm-hm."

Maya smirks, leaning forward with an impish smile on her face.

"Rei isn't malicious, you know."

Asuka makes a sound much like a confused pet, turning and staring at Maya. Closing her mouth, folding her hands in her lap, she rocks back and forward on the seat.

"Um…w-what do you mean?" she asks, "It…I-I don't know if I'm upset with her, b-but I'm confused…"

"Rei's confusing," Maya responds, sitting back, "I remember when I first met her, I didn't really know what to make of her."

A small, wistful smile crosses Maya's face. Turning to her, shifting her seat to meet her gaze, Asuka allows herself a small, curious smile.

"When did you meet her?"

"Eight years ago," Maya responds, "My first job for NERV was basically baby sitting Rei for the Commander and Dr. Ikari."

*

*

Eight years earlier. The doors to the mausoleum office of the Commander opens as Yui Ikari walks through. Stopping at the desk of her husband, she holds up the singed end of her labcoat and purses her lips.

"Rei has discovered fire."

Looking up from the folder and financial request forms therein, Gendo Ikari takes a moment to stare, compose his response, and find an answer that does not ensure he sleeps on the couch.

"Can we replace her with one of the spares?"

He fails, miserably.

Her brow rises, her arms fold, and Gendo Ikari scratches the back of his head and folds like a card table under his wife's glare. Sighing, she pulls up a chair and sits across from him, grunting slightly as seat

meets seat.

"We need to find someone to help take care of her," she says, "When we both agreed to take her in, we also realized the importance of our jobs at NERV meant we couldn't spend every moment of every day with her."

"Times like this I miss Naoko," Gendo responds, signing off on a request, "We could always pass on the demeaning and messy jobs to her."

Yui groans, palming her face.

"Kozou's threatened to *shoot himself in the head* if we try to make him babysit again," she says, "Rei refers to him as her *special friend."*

"That poor bastard."

"So we need someone who is intelligent, capable…and maternal."

The door knocks. Yui turns, Gendo looking up from his reports as the brunette second head of Project E clears her throat.

"Dr. Ikari," Ritsuko says, "That morning interview for the assistant position is here."

Sighing, checking her phone list, Yui gives off another glare at her husband before crossing the office to the door.

"Very well," she says, "Ritsuko, are you doing anything tonight?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I haven't decided yet," Akagi responds, face firm and set, "But I'm pretty sure it doesn't involve baby sitting."

*

*

Maya Ibuki, recent graduate student, certified genius, and closet lesbian, looks up from a light reading of the theories of Dr. Naoko Akagi regarding sentient computer systems to glance at the clock. Choking back her nervousness regarding the five minutes until her

interview, she returns to her reading.

"Heee~ey."

Looks around. Seeing that she is alone in the lobby, she chalks it up to nerves and turns back to the reading.

"What'cha doin'?"

Shrugging, she turns to her side and the cup of water on the table next to her. As she completes the turn, she locks eyes with the face now peaking out of the ventilation duct on head level.

Squeaking in surprise, she watches with wide eyes as the small girl with pale skin and blue hair drops out of the ventilation duct and flips onto the seat next to her.

"Um…hi?" Maya says.

"I'm Rei," the girl says, "What'cha doin'?"

"I'm…waiting for an interview."

"Why?"

"Because I want to work here."

"Why?"

"Because…it is interesting work?"

"Why?"

"Because I studied it in college."

"Why?"

"Because I…you're a curious little girl, aren't you?"

Eyes closed, Rei nods, rocking back and forth in the seat.

"Ms. Ibuki?"

She and the girl turn to the door at the other end of the skylight lobby as Yui and Ritsuko walk in. Rei hops off the seat and skips over to Yui, beaming a smile as Yui stares at her with a raised eyebrow.

"My apologies, Ms. Ibuki," Yui says, "I see you've met my daughter,

Rei."

"Oh, no need, Dr. Ikari," Maya says, standing and bowing, "It wasn't a problem at all. She seems to be a very intelligent and curious girl."

Yui pauses. Ritsuko raises an eyebrow and turns to the girl.

"Really?" Yui asks.

*

*

"So, after they interviewed me, Doctor Ikari asked if I would be willing to act as a supervisor to Rei while I was there," Maya explains, sipping her thermos of tea as the train speeds along.

"A-and you agreed?" Asuka asks.

Maya nods, sighing wistfully.

"I have a much younger sister," she says with a smile, "So, I thought it would be easy. I have a sister who was six when I was hired by NERV. I thought there was nothing I wasn't prepared for."

She sips her tea. The smile is wistful, but for some reason her right hand is clenching.

"I thought wrong."

*

*

One week after being hired, Maya finds herself standing in the office of the Supreme Commander. Behind the desk, Doctor Ikari and Doctor Akagi discuss the photos delivered to them while the Commander stares. Hands folded in front of her, shaking in her shoes, Maya clears her throat and prepares for death.

"I decided to try something constructive," she says, "I realized that with her intelligence and abilities, keeping tools and possibly weapons out of Rei's hands was not something I could do arbitrarily. So, instead of just denying her, I gave her something to…occupy her."

Commander Gendo Ikari pushes the glasses up his nose and holds up the offending object. A small, pink and white double headed mallet.

"A squeaky mallet," he says.

Shoulders slumping, Maya nods.

"I have *no idea* how she destroyed Sub Commander Fuyutsuki's car with it."

Behind Ikari, Yui snatches a photo out of Akagi's hand and stares at it.

"How do you bend steel with a squeaky hammer?"

Gendo leans back, looking at the photo.

"From a 45 degree angle, apparently."

Yui palms her face as Ritsuko shrugs, looking towards the heavens. Muted discussions of 'energetic destruction' and 'Kozou was reduced to tears' are bandied about. During the week, the situation dawned on her that she was not the first sitter for this girl.

"Still," Yui sighs, "It's less than last week."

"True," Ritsuko whispers, "Last week she tried to switch the recipes for Sloppy Joe and *Bakelite*. That's not even mentioning what she did when she tried bobsledding on Unit 01's jet strips."

They stare at each other. Yui grabs the back of her husband's chair and spins him to face her. They talk amongst themselves, Maya swaying back and forth on her feet as she looks down and finds Rei standing next to her. A ventilation shaft has a grate hanging at an angle, and Maya sighs.

"Miss Ibuki," Yui says, "What is your opinion of Rei?"

"I…I think she's a very bright child," Maya says, "She's inventive, intelligent, and imaginative. She's very precocious and enjoys being stimulated, and has seriously impressed me with what she is capable of."

Yui's eyes go from Maya to Rei, who is smiling brightly.

"You're hired."

*

*

"So I started working at NERV," Maya says, rubbing Asuka's shoulder and finding the girl not flinching, "As it turned out, this was basically Rei's plan to get someone to praise her in front of Dr. Ikari. She started spending more time with Rei, I ended up in Project E."

"A-and she was eight?"

Maya nods, smiling.

"She's a smart girl," she says, "Very smart and very eager. And also more than willing to use people to get what she wants if she thinks it will help. You're not the first, but I honestly don't think she'd hurt you. It's not in her nature. She's just not very good at…"

Asuka turns to her, face expressive and curious.

"At what?"

"Being normal."

The train pulls in to the station at the base of the NERV pyramid. Sighing, Maya slaps her knees and stands.

"I need to check in with Sempai Akagi, first," Maya says, "Maybe you could meet me for lunch?"

Asuka nods, a shaky smile on her face. Waiting, watching her leave, Asuka gets her own bag and walks out with the crowd. As she joins the masses of humanity, uncomfortable and hiding her discomfort, she allows herself a smile. People change, after all. Maybe she will, to.

After all, Rei was an absolute *terror* when she was younger. She must have grown out of those little stunts she pulled.

*

*

Clicking on the lights in his office, Kozou Fuyutsuki, Sub Commander and in reality third in command of NERV, looks up from his newspaper and takes a sip from his coffee. Sighing, he places the newspaper down, takes the flash from the inside of his jacket, and pours a generous helping of whiskey into his morning caffeine.

"So this is why I never had children."

And so he gets to work, pulling at the layers of saran wrap covering the entirety of his office.

*

*

Swiping the keycard through the reader, Shinji sighs as he enters NERV-1. He honestly has better things to do on a Saturday, but there is not a single man in his family who can say no to his mother. Walking through the turnstyle and security detectors, he takes the elevator down to the locker room level, if only so he can get the synch test done early and maybe, just maybe, have some daylight left on Saturday.

The door opens. He looks up.

Red eyes.

"Hi, Rei," Shinji growls.

He slides past her, walking to the locker rooms down the hall.

"Are you angry with me?" she asks, pouting.

"Yes," he seethes.

"Why?"

"Because you tricked me! You tricked me and Asuka!"

She nods, smiling. Slapping his palm over his face, he groans. No use trying to make her feel guilty if she doesn't believe she did anything wrong. Dropping the subject, he walks past her and into the locker room, glancing at the doorway and thanking providence she does not follow him.

Slumping down onto one of the benches in front of his locket, he folds his hands in his lap and sighs. He has to find Asuka at some point and they need to talk. He can't just let things stay awkward, and…

"Ikari!"

Looking up, he snorts, nostrils flaring as he locks eyes with Uriel.

"We need to talk."

Shinji sighs, closes his eyes and slumps his shoulders.

"Swell."

*

*

"Asuka, please take these memos down to Dr. Akagi. She'll be in Central Dogma."

Nodding, forcing a smile, Asuka takes the folder and walks down the hall. The NERV uniform is functional, if a little stiff around the edge of the dress, but she doesn't mind. If anything, it is also fully concealing, and she can work with that. One step in front of the other, one foot first, she walks down the hall, the sensible black shoes clicking along metal.

It is good to be useful to someone, she considers. Doctor Ikari always smiles and is considerate and *loves to have her around* while making sure she is not having problems at home. Still, though. She needs to talk to Shinji. Maybe keep from stuttering when talking to him, keep her from embarrassing herself.

Maybe she needs to talk to Dollie before she does.

Clicking the button for the elevator, he thoughts swim. She really does need to talk to him. Maybe talk to Rei, to, but Rei does unnerve her. It was easier when she could talk with her over email, when the personality didn't come out and smother her or pull her along or make her freeze up with how open it is. And she needs to talk with Misato, to. She needs to find something to do, and hopes the thing with Misato's PDA this morning didn't freak her out, because it does when she does it with Uri or people Mother works with at NERV-Germany and especially with Papa-

The door opens. Asuka stares, eyes meeting green eyes and the blank, stoic face of the sole occupant of the elevator.

"What are you waiting for?" she asks, "Get in."

"Yes, Mother."

Obediently as always, Asuka takes the position next to Kyoko, and the elevator doors close for their long descent.

*

*

"We need to talk," Uri says, arms folded as Shinji opens his locker, "About my sister."

"Sounds great," Shinji deadpans, "What about? We can choose issues, you know. Maybe make something up as we go along. How's about that?"

A hand slams the locker shut. Shinji steps back, whirls on Uri and stands on his tip toes to get to eye level as the other pilot glares at him.

"Fine," Shinji says, "What do you want to talk about? The fact that your sister is a nervous wreck half the time? How she apparently cuts her palms with her nails? Wait, wait."

Shrugging, hands out and smiling, Shinji pats Uri on the shoulder.

"Let's start with *why* Asuka thought it was a good idea to *throw herself* at me. How about *that?*"

*

*

She goes silent. It is never a good idea to speak directly to Mother, after all. She does not respond well to questions, and especially in this environment she is likely to lash out as to keep cool and quiet as she always does. Silent, waiting, Asuka folds her hands at her waist, holding the folder under her arm as she watches floors tick by *too slowly just go faster please*

"Asuka?"

"Yes, Mother?"

Kyoko regards her with a cool gaze, clicking on her PDA.

"Uri has been curious how you have been doing in school."

"I have been doing fine, Mother," Asuka responds, eyes closed, "It has not been a problem."

The floor jerks. The elevator lurches, Asuka biting back a cry as Kyoko stumbles and slams against the wall. A littany of teutonic swears followed by her climbing back to her feet, slamming the emergency button for the elevator and getting statis.

"Now *what?"*

*

*

The central screen of Dogma flickers and blinks out, the bridge falling into darkness. First to respond, Misato stands up from her seat and puts the general feeling of the skeleton crew bridge into words.

"What the *Hell* just happened?!"

"Power's out," Ritsuko says, flicking on her PDA, "Same for the rest of the base. Emergency power's offline, to."

"That's not possible," Misato growls, folding her arms, "Alright. Someone get the Commander and Doctor Ikari! Are all the pilots in the base?"

"Can't confirm or deny either way," Makato responds, whacking the side of his screen, "We need to do this on foot."

Misato growls, palming her face. Just perfect, she thinks. Just f__ing perfect. Now she just needs to find out what exactly is going on and then figure out if there's an Angel breathing down their neck.

"Riiiight," she breathes, taking out her PDA, "Okay, all the trackers we have are battery powered, and…"

Tapping buttons on the PDA, a map of the base appears, followed by three blinking lights.

"Got them!"

*

*

The card swipes. The turnstyle does not respond.

"Well, that's not good."

Staring at the card, Mana grimaces, swiping it again. If it was the wrong card, she muses, at least it would give some sort of negative beep or red x. This just means the entire thing's down. Backing out of the turnstyle, she walks over to the next one to her right and swipes the card again.

Once more, nothing.

The textbook definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. And Mana Kirishima is not insane. Most definitely not.

"Trying to get in?"

Turning, she comes face to face with a glasses wearing redheaded girl with little definition of personal space. Instincts take over, there is a blur of motion, and the girl is face down on the turnstyle with her arm locked behind her.

"Could you please let go of my daughter?"

Mana looks up. Eyes go wide, and she lets go, the girl dropping to the floor as Mana clicks her heels and salutes. Walking up to them is a man with short, graying brown hair, turtleshell eyeglasses and a crisp, black NERV uniform.

"Subdirector S-"

"No need to get formal, Captain," the man says, lazily saluting back, "Mari, I know you're eager to get inside, but let's not overdo it."

"Well, that's the problem," Mana says, shifting back and forth in her stance, "The automatic systems aren't working. We're going to have to go by manual entrance."

The older man sighs, folding his arms as his daughter dusts off her plaid skirt and glares at Mana, who glares back. Behind them, the massive doors remain silent and dead. Checking his watch, he takes out his PDA and clicks a display.

"Well, if my schematics are accurate, the best manual access port I can fit in is this way…"

*

*

"We still need to talk, Ikari."

"We can do that after the power comes back on and we're safe. So kindly try not to trip over your own feet, okay?"

A snort in the darkness as Shinji shines the PDA's display light down the corridor as the two walk. Sighing, Shinji cracks the knuckles on his free hand before turning back to his display.

"I'm guessing the adults are all in Dogma," he says, "We should try to find my parents, to. If anyone knows what's going on, it's Mom."

"I will reluctantly agree upon that with you."

Two lights in the darkness this time, which is fortunate that neither of them had time to change to their plug suits before the lights went out. For some reason the only things he sees Uri in are NERV uniforms and skin tight piloting outfits.

"Why aren't you in school?"

"Mother insists I get home schooled," Uri responds, "And schooled at NERV. Although, unlike Asuka, I do not have a degree."

"Degree? As in college degree?"

Uri nods, unseen in the darkness. Noticing that, he sighs.

"She graduated three years ago. I was at the graduation, and Mother was quite sore with both of us because I was supposed to be testing that day."

Shaking his head, he continues on. Either not noticing or not caring about the silence, Uri sighs and continues.

"I love my sister, Ikari," he says, "Whatever you may think, I do. I do not want to see her hurt."

"Any more than she already is."

Hand grabs his shoulder and spins him around, and in the near darkness with the light reflecting off his features, he can see them twisting in anger. Eyes narrowed, lips twisted, teeth showing.

"Don't mock me," he snarls, "Do you think I don't *know*? Do you think I don't *care*?"

"Yes and no," Shinji calmly responds, prying off his hand, "My parents don't win awards either, but I do know that my mother, at least, made sure I could stand up on my own two feet if I had to. I'm seeing a lot less of that in your family."

Uri's knuckles crack. Any motion to punch him, however, falls short when a hand grabs his wrist and he turns to stare into red eyes.

"Oh, this is gooooooood," the voice drawls, "We're all friendly, aren't we? 'Cause if we're not, I might have to make someone my *special friend."*

"Rei! Is that them?"

Flashlight in one hand, PDA in the other, Misato gives off a relieved breath when the light hits Uri and Shinji.

"Misato?"

"Yeah Shinji, it's me," she says, "Asuka pimped out my PDA earlier today, and I ran into Rei on the way here. Are you alright?"

Uri pulls away his hand, growling under his breath.

"We are fine, Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi," he says, "Do you know where my mother and sister are?"

*

*

The light of Kyoko's PDA is the only illumination in the elevator as the woman reads over reports and status changes relating to Unit 02. Not a word has been said between them since the elevator stopped, which more or less is par for the course between the two. Asuka has retreated to the other side of the elevator, trying to avoid even the line of sight of the woman.

"Asuka?"

"Yes, Mother?"

"I understand you are getting along with Ikari's child. Is this true?"

"Yes, Mother."

Silence, an acknowledging grunt from Kyoko for a few moments. More tapping on her PDA.

"You attempted to sleep with him?"

"Yes, Mother."

"And?"

"It didn't work, Mother. He…does not see things like that."

"Well, you'll have to eventually," Kyoko says, "For some reason, the boy has taken an interest in you, and your proximity to him helps his synch scores. As we discussed, you will do everything within your power to aid him, even if you did fail as an Eva pilot yourself. Are we understood."

"Yes, Mother."

Biting her lip, clenching her hand into a fist, Asuka closes her eyes and takes deep, soft breaths so not to disturb her. Her mother is wrong, she tells herself.

He does not see her like that. He does not behave like that. He would not do that to her, not like Mother believes he would. She is wrong, she tells herself. She is wrong. *She is wrong.*

If she repeats that to herself, over and over and over and over again, it may not sound hollow and empty.

Lights flicker on, and the lift jerks. Kyoko swears a thanks and clicks off her PDA as the elevator car comes to a stop. Several floors above Dogma, it stops, Asuka wiping her face on the back of her sleeve as the doors jerk, and stop.

"The doors are jammed," Mana's voice announces from past the doors, "You, girl! Grab the other end and help me pull!"

The doors jerk open. Mana peaks her head in and grins.

"Hey! Power's restored and we've been looking all over for you two!

Guess who I ran into on my way here!"

Kyoko sighs, closes her PDA and pockets it. Muttering, she looks past Mana.

And goes white. Fists clench and her eyes narrow as color returns, and she mutters a swear under her breath as she moves past the bubbly, red-haired girl and to the older man who reacts as if struck to her gaze.

"Hello," she says, "Pieter."

"Hello, Kyoko," he responds, folding his arms and smirking, "Small world. Before you start your little inquisition routine, I'm here because Mari might be a potential Child and this is the best place to test her. Besides which, as Sub Director of NERV-Germany, I sort of have to check in with the Boss every now and then."

Sighing, he shakes his head, rubbing the bridge of his nose as Asuka peaks out, moving out from the corner she was standing in. Her eyes light up, avoiding Mari and Mana, gazing directly on Pieter.

Sub Director Pieter Sohryu gives off a small, albeit awkward smile. Hands folded behind him, then in his pockets, he adjusts his glasses and grins.

"Hey there," he says, "How're you doing, Asuka?"

"Oh, thank God!"

The group turns as Misato approaches, switching off her PDA before grabbing Asuka and pulling her out of the elevator.

"Young lady, your little GPS trick saved our asses," Misato says, patting her on the back, "If this was an Angel attack, you would have pretty much been responsible for saving humanity. We're going out to a steak place, on me."

Asuka smiles, shakily, as she sees Shinji, Uri, and Rei approaching. Trying to avoid laughing or hyperventilating, she can only walk as Misato begins guiding her to the exits.

"Miss Katsuragi?"

Misato turns to Pieter, narrowing her eyes and looking up, mainly because the man stands a head taller than her.

"Yes?" she asks, "And you are…?"

"Sub Director Pieter Sohryu," he responds, "I'm Asuka's father."

Misato stares at her. She stares for a long time, and then finally, laughing, pats him on the shoulder.

"Great job," she whispers.

And laughing, she leads the group out, leaving the other dumbfounded adults standing there with Misato's laughter echoing down the metal hallway.

Chapter 11: The Situation of Asuka Langely Sohryu

"The lines were cut in twelve places. Someone knows the layout of our power systems, and decided to sabotage us. The list is a small one, and none of them are people I want angry with us. The other alternative, of course, is that an Angel has hijacked the MAGI and did this to mess with us."

The late day sun silhouetting him, Gendo Ikari looks over the photos as his wife leans on his desk, half sitting on it in that way she does when she wants him wrapped around her finger.

"You think it's the old men?"

"Kihl has a fondness for Sohryu," Yui says, "Mainly because when she was in Germany, he could keep an eye on her. He could be paying us back for taking his pet."

Hands tented in front of his face, Gendo Ikari grimaces. The Scenario, as the Committee referred to it as, was the Sword of Damocles that hung over all their heads. No doubt, the frightened old men that they reported to would keep tabs on them somehow. A reminder of how powerless they were one day, then one of Kihl's pet agents another day.

"Sohryu," he says, looking at the folders, "He sent Sohryu here."

"Pieter's bright, but not that bright," she responds, shrugging, "If Kihl sent him here to watch us, he doesn't know. He's an administrator and tactical advisor. But we should see if we could keep him."

A small chuckle comes from the most powerful man in the Far East.

"We can offer to keep him around his daughters," he says, "And to see if you can sway him to our side. Someone as high up as him is good to have as an ally. Eventually, Shinji is going to get upset when he realizes you're playing mother to everyone but him."

-

-

Chapter 11: The Situation of Asuka Langely Sohryu

-

-

"Am I the only sane person here?"

Shinji has found himself asking that question with alarming regularity. Of course, he is. In the entire breadth and depth of Tokyo-3, he is indeed the only sane man. It is not just that he has to deal with problems with his room mates and fellow pilots. Now, he has to put up with his classmates.

The target of his question is one those. A little shorter than him, dark hair in twin pigtails and someone who greeted him by slapping him, hard, Hikari Horaki and he have a complicated relationship built on mutual guilt. The problem is that she is also something of a friend, or at least someone he can stand behind around constantly. So, the situation is awkward. As much as he wants to just go to town on her verbally, he also knows she didn't do it to hurt him.

"Why did you do that?" he asks, whispering.

Outside of the classroom, while everyone else is on lunch, the conversation started. Hikari caved to a request from her sister, Kodama.

"It's nothing major," Hikari says, hands up defensively, "He's a medical student who's a long time friend of my sister. He's something of a… fan, I guess, of the Pilots and asked me if there was some way he could date one."

"Asuka's not a pilot," Shinji says through clenched teeth.

"She's the sister of one and she's the daughter of one of the designers," Hikari responds, "Besides which, she was recruited."

"Which she *loves* talking about," Shinji seethes, "Doesn't she? Always going on *fondly* about how her mother *yanked* her out of the program?"

Sighing, nervous smile disappearing, she scratches the back of her head as the reality of the situation hits home with neither subtlety nor grace.

"I guess I didn't think it through."

"Great. So call it off, tell Asuka she doesn't have to go-"

"Well, she *wants* to," Hikari says, rolling her eyes, "Look, her face just lit up when I told her. She agreed. I'm not press-ganging her into this. Someone wants to show her a nice time. So?"

Muttering something, he turns from her, running his hands furiously through his hair.

"Hey," she says, "Two things."

He turns on her, eyes narrowed. She could almost swore they *glowed*.

"First off," Hikari says, poking his chest, "She's not going to wait forever. Although, from your *blank* expression, I'm pretty sure you have no idea what I mean. Second, if it bothers you so much, why don't you go out and make sure she's safe?"

He nods. She smiles, satisfied in her victory. Which is short lived when he ducks back into the classroom, where only a handful of students remain, including one in particular.

"Hey, Touji!"

Suzuhara looks up from the mop bucket.

"I need to borrow the Class Rep, tonight," Shinji says, "Is that alright?"

"You gonna try anythin' dirty with her?"

"No, I'm leaving that to you."

"S'alright."

Shinji nods, salutes, and ducks back into the hallway. Hands balled into fists, Hikari levels two glaring eyes on him as he smiles.

"It's a date," he says.

Inches from his face, eyes narrowed, he blanches under her gaze.

"You are *so* dead."

*

*

It enters the atmosphere at somewhere along Mach 14. The outer shell burns up, the inner layer shifting, reforming, swirling to redirect heat and flame until it crashes off the coast of northern Russia.

NERV-Bethany's alerts go off, reading a pattern orange as VTOL craft are dispatched, a mass of red and black cooling underneath the shallow waters. Numbering two dozen craft, they hover, laser sights trained on the sphere as it moves along, clearing the water.

Missiles swarm out, cannons firing. The mass bubbles, screams, and chunks of black rock shoot out, two VTOLs sputtering and exploding before the mass explodes.

*

*

Pushing his glasses up his nose, Sub Director Pieter Sohryu, executive office of NERV-Germany, folds his hands behind his back as Dr. Ikari counts out stages. In the Plug entering Unit 02, Mari grins, hands tightly gripping and rolling over the butterfly controls.

"Okay, we're taking her to minimal depth," Yui says, "Mari, just breathe slowly. Maya, take it away."

Stepping back, she stands next to Pieter, favoring him with a small smile. He grins back, turning back to the screen.

"I'm surprised," she says, "I would have thought you would have gone back to your old name. Langely, wasn't it?"

"We parted on bad terms," he sighs, "But it wasn't all bad. She…well, she's a driven woman. I kept the last name because I didn't want to lose everything we had."

"I see," Yui says, "Asuka and I will be having lunch tomorrow. You'll join us."

"I'll check my schedule-"

"No," Yui says, narrowing her eyes, "You'll. Join. Us."

The screens light up. In the distant view of the Cage, Unit 02's eyes light up, dimly glowing green. Mari's grin goes wider, and Yui walks over to Maya's console, glancing at the numbers.

"Alright," she says, "Synchronization's holding at 38%. Not the same level that Uri has, but good enough that we can start training her as Unit 02's backup pilot."

She turns to Maya, patting her on the shoulder.

"Okay, bring her out," she says, "Forward all the data to my office."

"Not to interrupt," Pieter says, "But why yours? I thought Unit 02 was Kyoko's fiefdom."

"Do you really think Doctor Sohryu would allow us to test your daughter in Unit 02 without me overruling her?" Yui asks with a smirk.

Motioning to the lifts in the back of Dogma, she walks towards them, Pieter following. He clears his throat as they stand next to each other, the doors closing as he thrusts his hands in his pockets and sighs. Looking up, looking at the buttons, looking at the clicking floor numbers.

"You wanted to speak to me?" he asks.

"Am I that transparent?"

"Would 'yes' involve me stationed at NERV-Australia for the rest of my life?"

"Yes."

"Then you are opaque and complex without a single hint of transparency."

"Good boy," Yui says, pulling out her PDA, "I'm concerned. When was the last time you spent some time with your other daughter?"

Pieter snorts, smirking.

"If Kyoko had her way, I wouldn't know she was even born."

Yui turns, a smirk on her face, and she pushes her glasses up her nose.

"Can you tell me anything?" she asks, "Her height? Favorite toy? Her third grade report card?"

"Not my choice, Doctor Ikari."

Yui snorts, clicking off her PDA.

"Tell yourself whatever helps you sleep at night," she says as the doors open, "If you'll excuse me…"

Walking through, she enters the floor of her office, sneakers clapping on polished metal floors. He watches her go, tipping his head. Doors closing, he leans back, rolling his head back as he groans and gives off a soft, muted swear.

"Damn it."

And he mashes the button for the locker rooms.

*

*

She doesn't own anything that could actually be counted as revealing. It just isn't what she has. She doesn't dress up often, so the best she could find on short notice was a white long sleeved blouse and red skirt. It makes her look old, but the date is about twenty years old, so she guesses it fits. Maybe.

She borrowed some of Misato's lavender perfume, has a nice set of gold hoop earrings, and holding her bag, she walks with her date down one of the upscale shopping districts of Tokyo-3.

Ducking out from a fast food stall, Shinji narrows his eyes, sneaking along to a light post. Walking up behind him, standing next to him and visible in plain sight, Hikari folds her arms and glares at them, then back at Shinji.

"Oh, yeah," she says, "Nefarious plot."

"Don't blame me, I didn't set up the blind date."

Grabbing her by the arm, he pulls her along, trailing behind Asuka and the young man as the two chat and walk, never touching hands. Muttering to herself, she walks in plain sight as he tries to hide, rolling her eyes as he stops and pretends to check out a cell phone stands while Asuka and the med student discuss where to eat.

"What do you hear?" Shinji asks.

"Sorry, can't hear it over the paranoia."

"I'm serious, Hikari."

"Wow, what a coincidence," she says, with folded arms, narrowing her eyes as he wilts under her glare, "You drag me out here, and you expect me to be enthusiastic?"

He turns to her, gritting his teeth to argue. The tirade and resulting argument, which could reveal their position, is averted by the cloth coming over his mouth and his eyes rolling up, before a pair of black suit clad arms dart out of the alleyway behind Hikari and pull her in.

The cell phone vender hefts up Shinji, nodding to two vagrants on either side of the alleyway. Standing up, shedding their worn coats to reveal the crisp black suits underneath, they grab the legs as the vender takes out his cell phone.

"Agents reporting in. Matchmaker and Third acquired. Ready to begin Operation: Cockblock at your discretion, Commander."

*

*

The boy, Hoshi, seemed nice enough. He was worshipful of NERV, and not too bad to look at. Dark brown hairs, blue eyes, nice build. Older than her by four years, but she imagines this is what Shinji will look like at twenty. At least, what he will look like assuming he isn't killed by the next Angel, or the one after that, or

Stop thinking that, she tells herself. Just enjoy the moment. She smiles, admittedly forced as they sit down at the karaoke bar he is old enough to bluff his way into for the both of them. He smiles, a smile that looks innocent to her at least, but mainly she likes because it's directed at her.

"So," he says, "Do you talk with the pilots, a lot?"

"I do," she says, throat tight, going over the words again and again to keep her stammer down, "The pilot of Unit 02 is my brother, Uri. I like with Shinji…um, h-he's the Third Child, and I used to p-pen pal with Rei."

"Really?" he asks, smirking, "You've been pretty deep in it, haven't you? Your mom made Unit 02, didn't she?"

"Y-yes," she says, eyes darting away, looking to the side, to the karaoke machine, "I-I didn't r-really help…"

"Did she ever tell you how she programmed it? Must've been a programming miracle…"

"N-no."

Sucking her lip, clenching her hands into fists, she looks away as the waiter finally comes with their drinks. A soda for her, a drink for him. The bar is nice, she tells herself. There is a nice wood grain floor and a very nice series of decorations of pre-Second Impact bands on the walls. Maybe it is nerves, and that's why she seeing things. Like people she should recognize walking around, or sitting near.

She never went on a date before.

Mother never allowed it.

She'll pitch a fit when she hears about this. She will. Just another distraction when she should be prostituting herself towards Shinji like Mother said. Sighing, fighting back the coughing and wheezing these thoughts always point her towards; Asuka turns back to her date and forces a smile.

Taking her drink, she downs half of it in one gulp. She smiles, again, trying to keep her eyes open as the lids become heavier and heavier. Her hands become sluggish and stiff and fat as she brings them up to her face, and her vision of her date doubles, then triples, and…

*

*

Asuka leans on her hand, slurring her words before collapsing, face resting on the table. Grinning, Hoshi clears his throat and takes out his wallet, waving to a waiter.

"Hey, over here," he calls, "I'll take the-"

"We'll take a green tea, hot, and two diet sodas."

Someone's been singing at the karaoke machine, a german pop song about the nuclear apocalypse.

Hoshi looks to his right. Hikari smiles, a forced, angry thing on her

lips as she pulls up a chair and sits. Across from her, the kid her recognizes from photos as Shinji Ikari sits across from her.

The song finishes, and the singer hands off the mike from his white gloved hands. For some reason, a disco beat begins playing as he walks across the karaoke bar, fixing his black jacket and adjusting his amber glasses.

Pulling up a chair, he sits down, tenting his hands into a bridge underneath his nose and staring at the young man.

"Hello."

He takes the glass from the sleeping Asuka, sniffing the contents.

"Rohypnol," he says, "Classy. Do you know who I am?"

Hoshi nods. Swallowing down his dry throat, Hikari and Shinji take the same pose as the Commander pushes the glasses up his nose. The small hissing sound confirms the desired outcome of Hoshi wetting himself.

"The lady you have drugged," Gendo Ikari says, "Is the daughter of one of my scientists. Allow me to introduce you to her security detail."

Every patron stands.

Coats and other clothes are discarded to reveal a wall of black suits and sunglasses. Hoshi shivers in his seat, looking from side to side, trying to figure out an egress point.

Which become moot when three darts hit the back of his neck and he collapses.

Standing, Gendo adjusts his coat again. As the last bits of consciousness begin to leave Hoshi, the Supreme Commander of NERV walks over and yanks him up by the hair.

"I am making an exception," he hisses, "I would normally not hesitate to have you killed for what you tried. But you are going to serve as an example. Have a nice trip."

He lets go as the boy's eyes roll up and close, turning to Shinji.

"Take her back to the apartment," he says, "We will handle things from here."

Shinji nods, taking one arm, draping it over his shoulder as Hikari takes the other. They exit, quickly, Asuka's feet trailing on the floor. Watching them go, turning on a bluetooth and nodding as he ehars the regular updates from Section 2 personnel regarding their safety, he points to Hoshi. Two Section 2 agents grab him, dragging him out.

His deed done, Gendo Ikari turns. He walks, solemnly, to the other end of the bar. Pausing, considering his options, he reaches into his pocket and withdraws several coins. A selection clicks, and a loyal Section 2 agent hands him the mic.

"Play that Funky Music, White Boy" begins playing.

All is going as according to plan.

*

*

There is only darkness around him. The darkness is moving, along with the crate as it gets loaded into the shipping container, but he doesn't know that. He doesn't a lot of things, right now.

He wakes up in a darkened room, sitting on a comfortable chair. Eyes opening, he peers around, unable to penetrate the haze as the drugs wear off. His body feels stiff, painful and sluggish, like he's just wearing off a sedative. Rubbing his brow, rubbing his nose, rubbing his face with both hands, he looks up and sees only the dim lightbulb.

Side to side he peers, nothing. In front of him, nothing.

"Uh…where am I?" Hoshi asks.

His answer comes from two red eyes in the darkness behind him.

"Heee~ey."

*

*

The door to Asuka's room closes and Shinji rests against the wall next to it. Groaning, he picks himself up and walks down the hallway into the living room. Hikari stands up from the couch, opening her mouth…and thinking better of it, bows her head. She sighs, scratching

the back of her head as he leans on the couch.

"I am going to take my sister *apart*," she seethes.

"It's not her fault," he says, "She had no idea he's try…*that* with her."

Hikari nods. Walking forward, she wraps her arms around Shinji, patting her hands against his back as he sighs, resting his chin on her shoulder.

"Thanks for coming," he says.

"Didn't have a choice," she responds with a chuckle, "You take good care of her, Ikari. Alright?"

He grunts a response. Leaning back, holding at arms length, a smile comes across her face. The lights are out in the living room, the only sounds traffic and pedestrians in the late night. No distance is between them, and for a moment they both consider the possibility.

"Don't keep her in suspense," she says, leaning in and pressing her lips to his cheek, "I'm heading home."

Breaking away, she walks through the door. Slumping his shoulders, finding himself able to breathe again, he slumps onto the couch. He is there in the morning when Misato arrives.

*

*

With a splash of vaporizing water, the red and black sphere hit off the coast of China. NERV-5, based in Beijing, mobilized a tank regiment in response, fighter jets back at the central base prepping for launch. Reports from NERV-Bethany told them what to expect.

Turrets aimed, shells were loosed, exploding on the puddle. Blocks of solid matter shot out in response, savaging the attacking force as a red eye opens at the center, just in time for the fuel air bombs from the fighter wing to impact.

*

*

"Send it up," Misato says, staring at the images of Bethany and NERV-5. The central screen flashes and becomes a view of the Eastern Hemisphere as seen from space. Except, obstructive the view is a large black sphere.

"Fire away," she says.

Surrounding the sphere, a half dozen weapons satellites come to life. Spinning explosive rods fire out, silent in their travel in the upper reaches of the atmosphere. In Dogma, Misato, Ritsuko, and Sohryu watch as the rods shoot out by the dozens, by the hundreds, each one containing enough high explosive to take out a fortified military bunker.

"Three," Misato counts, "Two…one. Boom."

The rods glow, a flash filling the screen. 3600 sub-nuclear munitions detonate, filling the sky with shrapnel and flame. Watching, waiting, the three highest ranking officers present wait as the light clears.

A small, resigned breath escapes Misato's mouth as the screen prominently displays the orange glow around the object and the shredded, ripped apart remains of the obscenely expensive satellite missile launch platforms.

"Well, that was a wonderful waste of our time," Kyoko mutters.

"I'm shocked and appalled that I agree with Dr. Sohryu," Misato groans, hands on her hips as she glares at the screen, "Maya! Send up the alert!"

All throughout Tokyo-3, in the early hours of the morning, the shrill whine of the alarm rings throughout the streets. And on the PDAs of every ranking member and pilot, and on the screen at the heart of Central Dogma, four lines of text display the situation at hand:

-

-

ALERT

AT FIELD DETECTED

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED

9TH ANGEL: CONFIRMED

-

-

Rubbing her eye, Asuka stumbles out of the bedroom. Waving a muted greeting to Shinji, she slumps against the kitchen counter, both eyes shut against the light of the kitchen.

"You alright?" Shinji asks.

She mumbles something, stumbling out and walking to the couch, half falling on it.

"W-what happened?" she moans.

"Your…date tried something," he responds, already next to her, hands on her shoulders, "He put something in your drink. It's probably upsetting your stomach and-"

Her face turns green. Puffing her cheeks, she runs to the bathroom, Shinji on her heels just in time to see her bent over the toilet and vomiting. Softly, silently, gently, he gets down to his knees, gathering her hair and pulling it from her face and the bowl. Her hands grip the porcelain with renewed fever, her shoulders shaking as the contents of the last two days empty.

He sees it, then. Narrowing his eyes as her shoulders hitch, he sees the back of her neck. There are a series of red marks, a set of six half circles and three full circles. Haphazard and random, faded against the pink skin, he reaches out with his other hand to touch them and confirm what they are.

The chance passes when she pushes off of the can, stumbling to the sink and spitting. Swinging open the medicine cabinet and pulling out the mouthwash, she takes a deep pull and begins gargling, spitting with enough force to cause some of the bubbling blue liquid to splash over the side.

Hitting the flush button on the toilet, he stands, waiting as she braces her hands on the sink. Closing the cabinet, he watches as she stares at her reflection. Her fingers curl, knuckles turning white, her shoulder shaking as her lip trembles. Moving on instinct, he moves to her and pulls her from the sink, pulling her into his arms. Her entire body

shakes as she presses her face against his chest, a muted cry her only sound.

For minutes, maybe more, they stand in the silent embrace. Questions swim through his mind. On the marks, on what is going through his mind. Questions, he realizes, he can ask later. Right now, this is important. The only important thing right now is being here, letting the last night drain away.

"Thank you," she whispers.

He grunts an acknowledgement, tightening his hold with a gentle squeeze. She manages a shaky smile as she moves away, his hold releasing on her as she runs a hand through her hair, fresh tear lines moving down her cheeks. She sighs, biting her lip, wringing her hands.

"I-I remember some of it," she says, "He p-put something in m-my drink, didn't he?"

He nods.

"F-figures," she sighs, "F-figures, d-doesn't it? F-first time someone a-a-asks me out, and h-he t-tries…"

Her face twists. A small, low moan escapes her lips, her arms wrapping around her. Fresh tears run down her cheeks as her lip trembles, her palms leaving red dots along her white sleeves.

"I'm s-sorry," she stammers, "I'm s-sorry you h-have to deal w-with me."

"Don't be," he says, his hands laying on her arms, turning her to face him, "Don't be. He's a piece of…don't be."

He surprises himself with the vitriol in his voice. Clenching his teeth, closing his eyes, for a moment silence passes between them. Gently, her hand touches his, a sad smile crossing her face.

"T-thank you," she says, "F-for putting up with me."

"I don't 'put up' with you," he says with a small laugh, "If he hurt you, I would have *killed him."*

"Why?" she asks.

His eyes go wide, mouth hanging open at the question. Composing

himself, the small grin returning to his features, he finds her face almost blank. Except for one small emotion which he can't place.

"What?"

"Why would you do that," she says; her voice small and soft, almost afraid of being heard, "Why for me? I'm not worth sacrificing over-"

"No," he snaps, "You *are."*

She stops in mid sentence. Her eyes probe, her gaze upon him one of borderline desperation and need. Her lip trembles and her shoulders shake, her instincts burning in her mind to pull away, but she can't get to the door past him. So, she takes the second option.

"Why?"

"Because you're fun to be around," he says.

She nods.

"Because you're smart," he says, "Because you have a great smile when you show it. Because you have a really nice laugh and because…"

He bites his lip. No time like the present, he thinks. Besides which, his mother's probably watching this all from her office, so he can either go ahead with this and do what's *right* or get lectured for the rest of his life.

"Because you're beautiful," he says.

A shaky, unsure smile crosses her face.

"R-really?"

He nods.

"P-please don't lie to me," she whispers, "Really?"

"I have never seen anyone like you," he says, "It…I can't explain it without sounding stupid. It…your eyes are just the clearest blue I've ever seen. Your face is pretty much…flawless. Tell me to stop any time if you think I'm being sappy."

Her smile becomes wider. Her shoulders shake as her eyes tell him to continue.

"Your…well, I can't say I've ever met any redheads outside of Mana, and she's a little too over eager," he continues, "But I'll admit, one of the reasons I asked Misato to take you in is I don't mind waking up to see you every morning. I don't know what anyone else has told you, Asuka, but you *turn heads.* Everyone about you is just-"

She leans forward and presses her lips against his. Eyes close and the world stops, his arms wrapping around her. The kiss is soft, and almost chaste, their lips pressing against each other in a simple moment that seems to go on forever. Her breath tastes of mint and old soda, her arms wrapping themselves around his back as her breath tickles, the edges of her lips curling upward.

Any moment has to end, though. The lips part and her eyes meet his, probing for something, and her face splits into a smile as she finds it. Wrapping her arms around him, she lays her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes as he holds her for the long, silent aftermath.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"Thank *you,"* he responds, "I thought I'd have to go on about your legs."

She stares at him, raising an eyebrow.

"I said that *out loud,* didn't I?"

She laughs, and his phone rings. Sighing, he takes it and stares at the number, clicking it open and bringing it up to his ear.

"Please tell me you don't have cameras in Misato's bathroom."

"I have cameras everywhere," Yui responds, *"And I saw everything. Good boy. Now get to base. There's an Angel."*

He nods, closing the phone and turning to her.

"We have to go," he says.

"Okay," she says, moving out of the embrace, "Thank you."

He nods, smiling, and waits as she walks out to change. Slumping against the wall, running a hand through his hair, he grits his teeth and growls.

"I'm going f__ing *murder* that Angel."

*

*

High in the stratosphere, the great black Sphere identified as the Angel turns. It is time, it thinks. It is time to begin. Turning towards its target, the source of its hunger and reward, it begins to link its Mind to that of another already There.

A form is chosen. A symbol that shall serve It as it begins its Plan.

Dozens of small black spheres break off from its Form and accelerate into the atmosphere.

It is Time for the Trial.

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

I AM

THROUGH LICENSE OF HE WHO IS CALLED "I AM" I HAVE COME

THOUGH I SHALL ONLY ONCE TOUCH THE BASE EARTH ON THIS BLESSED QUEST, I HAVE COME

MY FORM SHALL BE VAST AND NUMEROUS

NEW TRUTH SHALL BE FORGED WITHIN MY PASSING

AND THE NUMEROUS FORMS THROUGH WHICH I SHALL SCOUR THE LILIM OF THE EARTH SHALL BE WRIT DOWN IN THE WAY

OF PRAYER AND LEGEND

I AM THE INGENUITY OF GOD

ANGEL OF THE SKIES

I AM SAHAQUIEL

I AM COMING

Chapter 12: Catch the Sky

The smile she wears is genuine. After the incident in the apartment, Asuka finds herself standing with her shoulders straighter, walking with a more confident stride and eyes almost alight as she walks down the catwalks of Cage Three, the holding area for the purple behemoth of Unit 01. Of course, now is not the time to focus on that.

The Angel is coming.

They can focus on it after he saves the world. Odd, she muses. She is already crediting him with saving the world, not thinking about her brother, Rei, or Mana.

A blush flushes her cheeks as she realizes why, quickly walking up stairs and into the hallways spiraling around the Cage. The technicians are working at their normal, frantic pace, checking servos and coolant lines, making sure the LCL pumped into the exoskeletal frames of the Evas are at the right temperature.

All is going according to specs, she can report to Dr. Ikari with confidence, and hopefully avoid any awkward questions about what she was doing with her son.

"Asuka."

Freezing, eyes snapping open, as the same high heeled shoes stab the metal hallway. Her hand tightens over the status reports on Unit 01 as she locks eyes with her Mother, toes curling in her shoes.

"We need to talk," Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu says, lips a thin line across her face.

Stammering, knees, shaking, Asuka ducks her head and darts to the side.

"Excuse me," she whispers, "Doctor Ikari needs these files."

The hand lashes out, grabbing her arm with nails digging through the shirt. Asuka yelps, whimpers, eyes wide as Kyoko holds her fast.

"Of course," she says, "You do a good job."

"I-I do," Asuka says, swallowing down her dry throat, "I do. Dr. Ikari values me as her assistant."

"She gave you that job out of pity," Kyoko says, "Don't hold yourself that high, *leibchen*. She has you here for her reasons, and I will remind you the only reason I even *brought you over* was out of doing a favor to *her* son."

Nails dig into her palms again, lips trembling. Biting back, trying to pull her arm free, finally succeeding in yanking free of her and leveling her eyes on her mother.

"Don't give me that look," Kyoko says, her voice lower, softer.

She finds herself facing her, now. Fingers trembling against the files, another tooth in the back of her mouth cracking as her knees shake. Kyoko folds her arms, raises her brow, and peers down through her glasses, a smirk gracing her features.

"You're a good worker," she says, and sighs, "Shame that is all. I always hoped you inherited a fraction of my intelligence, but for all your study and tuition, here you are. Doctor Ikari's errand girl. A shame."

Asuka clenches her eyes shut, breathing slow, ragged, shaking her entire body. It could be called an argument if she actually was able to respond. Instead, her legs go limp like jelly, the fight leaving her the moment her mother's eyes narrow.

Instead, the argument ends when the full wall window turns purple. Glass cracks and shards go flying, and both Asuka and her mother are thrown to the floor by the impact.

"What the HELL just happened?!" Misato's voice screams over the speakers.

"There's a servo error in Unit 01's right arm," Maya responds, *"An error signal was sent from the onboard systems. We're correcting it now."*

Blood is already streaming down Asuka's forearm as she picks herself up, the purple receding from the window as Unit 01's arm is returned to its place, her mother on the floor, face down and groaning as several technicians run in.

"W-We're fine," Asuka says, holding her arm, and she shuffles away to find some gauze, "Someone should call a doctor for my mother."

-

-

Chapter 12: Catch the Sky

-

-

The table beeps. The polished metal surface fades, becoming transparent as a soft blue light plays over it, forming into a grid outline of the Far East. Those familiar with pre-Second Impact maps who were not already insensate to the horrors of the Second Impact would be, for lack of better terms, horrified. Indonesia, for example, is missing half of itself. Several low lying islands are gone.

There is also a hole in Japan where Tokyo-1 should be, but that's a different matter entirely.

"Here's what we've got," Misato says, the holographic map panning upwards to a large black sphere, "The Angel has taken the form of a 7-kilometer wide black sphere in high Earth orbit. NERV-Bethany in Russia and NERV-4 in Beijing have both registered impacts outside their city limits. The impacts take the form of…take it away, Ritsuko."

The hologram shifts into a pulsing black and red sphere.

"These projectiles serve two purposes," Ritsuko says, pushing her glasses up her nose, "First, they serve as mobile platforms and traps. While relatively fragile and vulnerable to high explosives, they do seem to be numerous. The second purpose is course correction."

The hologram returns to the Angel itself. Bracing hands on the table, Yui stares out at the pilots.

"The Angel intends to enter the atmosphere and crash into Tokyo-3. A surprise, I know. Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi and I both agree the best way to deal with the Angel is to attempt to catch it before it hits. We have been monitoring the rate of projectiles and have determined a…"

A ring appears around the hologram of Tokyo-3 and the surrounding towns.

"250 mile radius of possible impact points. Evangelions 00, 01, and 02 will be deployed in a triangular trajectory and will take off in a run when the Angel begins its descent."

Standing across from her, across the table, the four pilots nod.

"What about Jet Alone?" Mana asks.

"Jet Alone will be given the task of clearing the possible landing zone," Misato explains, "The Angel launches the correction missiles regularly. We're launching Jet Alone Prime ahead of time to clear the area."

Ritsuko nods, then bites her lip and taps Misato on the shoulder.

"How are we getting it there?" she asks, "The Angel has a tendency of shooting down any objects coming towards it. NERV-4 launched an ICBM at the Angel, and both that and the observation plane were shot down."

"It traces exhaust," Yui responds, tapping a button and showing an arching trajectory from NERV-1 towards the center of the circle, "We're going to overclock the launch catapults and throw Jet Alone."

A hand comes up.

"Yes, Mana?"

"So I'm getting tossed, hammer first, into a horde of mini angels?"

"Yes," Misato responds.

"F__ing metal."

Another hand raises with a cough.

"Yes, Shinji?"

"What hammer?" Shinji asks, easing slightly from Mana.

The hologram shifts into an image of the Jet Alone Prime. Next to the Prime is a hammer as big as it with a spinning disc at the center of the head. They turn towards the direction of the delighted squeal, and Rei, before turning back to the hologram.

"The JSSDF has sent us Jet Alone Prime's primary Melee weapon," Misato explains, "The High Impact Acceleration Hammer, or HIAH, basically converts speed and distance into kinetic force before impact. The hammer is about the same height as Jet Alone and weighs somewhere in the 75,000 ton range. We are all thankful it is not called Mjolnir."

"We call it Sigmar," Mana says, "The designer was a game geek. I'm all for this plan."

Uri stares at the girl, shrugging and folding his arms as Rei stares longingly at the hammer. The hologram shuts off, the lights in the room fading on as Misato folds her arms and grins.

"Time to save the world, kids," she says, "Saddle up. Lock and load."

*

*

Tightening the bandages and gauze around her arm, Asuka does not look up as the elevator door opens to admit her, simply preparing for her trip to Dr. Ikari's lab. It was an unfortunate detour to bandage herself, but she can't get blood on her uniform. That would be bad. Very bad.

"Hi, Asuka."

Looks up, finds Mari looking back at her. Asuka smiles, forcing it to the surface, and looks past her to find Pieter in the car as well. Her father grins, hands folded behind him, and swallowing but not loud enough to alert them, she steps into the car.

"Small world," Pieter says.

"I know," Mari responds, adjusting her glasses, "It's such a big place that I thought we'd never run into you, 'Ska. How's NERV treating you?"

"Fine," Asuka says, toes curling in her shoes partially because *she hates this girl so much just wants her to f__ingdie* "Dr. Ikari thinks I am a good worker."

"Good to hear," Pieter says with a grin, "So…I think this is the first Angel I've seen. Does it always get tense when they arrive?"

"I'd think so," Mari responds, turning to her father, "They do run a tight ship around here, from what Uri tells me."

"Uri?"

"He's a nice boy," Mari says with a shrug, "If a little stand offish. But he's dedicated and he doesn't mind having to train me."

Asuka says nothing, staring at the elevator floor ticker, clenching her tight fist as the bandages strain.

"Did you hurt yourself?" Pieter asks, "Asuka?"

She turns. Looks at him, looks at the bandages, pulls the sleeve down.

"Asuka, answer me," he says.

"There was an accident with Unit 01," she says, "I was hit by some glass. I am fine."

"No, you're not," he says, grabbing her wrist, "This isn't bandaged properly. We're going to the infirmary and having you checked out."

The doors open. Asuka yanks her hand back and glares at her father. Biting back a comment, biting back a statement about *now is a wonderful time to show actual concern,* she turns and quickly walks out. The doors close behind her as she turns the hallway and finds herself at Doctor Ikari's office, empty as it should be as the preparations continue for the sortie.

She doesn't come out for a while.

She makes sure everything is put back in its place when she does.

*

*

Settling back in the seat, Mana winces as the connections are made through the Suit. Resting her hands on the twin globes, they glow as her mind links with the AI of her chariot, the gold wall display in front of her clearing, honeycombing out into the Cage set aside.

"Biolink established. Meta Encapsulated Granule Awareness System: Online. Jet Alone Prime at full activation."

The mecha stands straight, eye visor glowing as the blue circle at the center of its chest ignites. A quick mental check off tells her the weapons systems are at full go and the mecha is operating with maximum efficiency. The other Evas are gone, already carted off to their prep sites, leaving her alone in the Cage as the cradle her glorious deliverer of Angelic Death rests in is rolled towards the rails lining the back of the launch area.

"Mana, we're at t-minus 15 minutes to launch. You ready?"

"Lemme at'em, Kaji," she says to her handler, "Jet Alone Prime's all green, and I'm lookin' forward to painting the hills black and red."

"Don't overdo it, Mana."

"Of course, Kaji," she says with a smirk under her helmet, "I am, of course, known for my restraint."

*

*

Her knees were scraped and her shoulder will bruise, but otherwise she went through Unit 01's malfunction without a mark. Kyoko counts herself lucky for things such as this and with a handful of aspirin and an icepack went back to her office to continue her work.

Stupid. It was stupid of her to focus on that *girl*. She isn't worth side-tracking this over and she will get an earful from Ikari for that.

Like she always said, she'll happily go to some sort of group therapy and repair the relationship with the girl after the Angels are gone, but right now she is *busy*. Slamming the files down on her haphazardly arranged desk, she takes a moment and stares at the ornaments. Her Nobel prize for Psychology sits next to the single portrait she has, of her, the girl, her Uri and whatever blind date she was set up on.

Swatting them aside, she opens the folder and stares at the numbers going down the graph page. To the layman, it is gibberish, but to her it is musculature data from her masterpiece. Leaning on the desk, sitting on it, she goes over the data with a careful eye, snapping out a pair of turtle shell eye glasses and sliding them on. Her lips purse, her eyes focused.

"Has anyone ever told you that you are so hot when you're studying?"

A muffled German swear and she looks up, narrowing her eyes as she stares across the Spartan office to the doorway.

"What do you want, Pieter?"

Knocking on the door, her ex-husband grins, swaying back and forth on his heels.

"Can I come in?"

"Might as well," Kyoko sighs, "You never listened to me, anyway."

"You never told me what you wanted," Pieter says with a shrug, "Or do we really need to go into why we broke up?"

She rolls her eyes, snapping off her glasses as she hops off the desk. Walking around it, she retrieves her PDA from the desk draw, swiping away the sticky used candy wrappers and placing it in her lab coat pocket.

"As much as I love twisting your metaphorical testicles in my hand," she says, folding her arms and pursing her lips, "We are busy. And why aren't you Germany yet?"

He snorts, leaning against the door. The smile grows wider, a cocky grin on his face as he gives off a short, knowing laugh.

"So eager to have me gone?"

"What was your first clue?"

He sighs. The smile disappears, fades as he runs his hand through graying brown hair.

"Actually," he says, "I'm staying. I've transferred over here as Sub Director."

"What?" she asks, looking up from her desk.

"Fuyutsuki's getting old. NERV has enough of a budget to have two people handle his responsibilities and take care of the executive paperwork and duties. So, I'm here to stay, and to watch over Mari."

Kyoko sighs, rolling her eyes.

"I'm sure your paramour misses you."

He sighs, again. Pain is behind the sound, his teeth grinding.

"She left me," he says, smirking slightly as she whirls, "For another woman."

She sucks her teeth, shrugging and shaking her head.

"My condolences."

"I had it coming," he mutters, "A bit of a blow to my ego, I assure you. If that makes your day better."

He bites out the last words. Clearing his throat he stands up straighter, folding his arms and making that ticking sound with his tongue he makes when he is thinking. She waits, turns to him, and folds her arms as he enters the office.

"Kyoko," he says, "How did Asuka cut her arm?"

"Unit 01 had an accident," she responds, "Some glass cut her arm."

He nods. Her eyes narrow, forehead wrinkling before her face turns into a scowl.

"You don't believe me," she says, "You think *I* did that to the girl?"

His teeth grind and his eyes narrow. Leaning forward, she backs up, eyes wide as his accusing gaze locks on her.

"No," he respond, "No, I don't. Because that sort of implies you care enough about her to *touch her."*

An intake of breath and the open hand hits his face with enough force to make him stumble back. Blood leaks from the small cuts on his cheek as her face turns red and eyes narrow, her knuckles cracking as her fists clench.

"Get out of my office," she growls, her voice a hairs breadth above a whisper, "You *f__ing hypocrite."*

One push and he's out on the floor outside the office, looking up just in time to see the door slam shut. Grunting, wincing as he touches the cheek, he climbs to his feet and starts walking to the lifts.

He has to have a *chat* with Dr. Ikari.

*

*

The starting point, the kickoff point, was a dam 120 miles outside of Tokyo-3. The sun was high in the sky, a scaffolding was put up to make sure everything checked out, and Shinji was still running the scenario through his mind that he had to run and catch an Angel about as big as Tokyo-3.

Right.

Nothing can possibly go wrong with this. In his left eye, Rei has her eyes closed, relaxing in the plug. She looks like she is meditating, her mouth moving with some unseen rhythm.

Another screen opens up. Uri is looking at him, face stone as it tends to be. Shinji, realizing that the channel is two way, closes Rei's window and sighs.

"Good luck," Uri says, *"It would upset my sister if you died."*

With that, the channel closes. Gritting his teeth, cracking his knuckles, he reaches his hands into the butterfly controls and closes his eyes. The indicator in the chest of his plugsuit glows blue in tune with the two indicators on his gloves. The plug turns clear as the mecha lurches, and once more, he feels the familiar, happy presence in the back of his mind.

"Third Child recognized," the voice calls out, *"Synchronization holding at 78%. Unit 01 has activated."*

"Okay," he breathes, "Ready to go."

*

*

"Unit 01, Unit 02, and Unit 00 reading activation," Maya calls out, "All batteries at full charge!"

Arms folded at the center of Dogma, Misato nods. The screen is still focused on the black sphere hanging miles overhead. A second screen lights up, showing a swarm of black and red spheres burning through the atmosphere.

"MAGI has calculated their landing trajectory," Aoba shouts, "We have a landing sight!"

"Launch Jet Alone," Misato says, "Pilots! We're almost ready!"

*

*

The catapult comes to life. For those with open audio channels, the sounds of Mana Kirishima whooping as the Jet Alone goes from 0 to Mach 1 in three seconds flat fill the air.

From the perspective of someone on ground level, the sight instead is of a series of plates at the edge of Tokyo-3 retracting before the cradle of Jet Alone launches with a sonic boom out of the street, careening through the air with the sparks of molten steel trailing it like exhaust.

The side compartment of the cradle opens, the massive metal fist of Jet Alone Prime gripping the handle of Sigmar as it reaches the zenith of its traveling arc.

The cradle cracks and breaks apart, jets' firing on the arms and legs before it slams into the ground. The eye visor glows, the giant rising and the disc at the center of the hammer's head spinning.

Two dozen red and black spheres impact all around it. The butt of the hammer slams into the ground. Around Jet Alone's left hand, lightning gathers. Bracing its size 300 heels on the ground, inside the cockpit, Mana grins.

The black spheres rise. They hover, and on each a single red eye opens. On either side, a stubby, three fingered arm juts out, two stubby legs popping out from underneath. Red angry lines run along the black surface, a single black pupil burnt into the red sphere of the eye. Without hesitation or warning, Mana swings, the hammer of Jet Alone driving into the eye core and launching one into the sky before it explodes, red bursts of energy deflecting off the armor of the mecha.

Before one of the black monsters shatters, forming into a wall of rock which begins pelting Jet Alone, the others following suit.

*

*

"We have movement!"

Misato looks up at the screen. The Angel has started to move. Biting her lip, she turns to the up high command center. If there is an expression on Fuyutsuki or Ikari's face, she doesn't see it.

"Let's get this show on the road," she says, "Pilots, in positions."

Three screens flip open. Each Evangelion bends forward, resting on one knee in a runner's sprint position, massive servos and hydraulics groaning in support of the weight of the 200' tall mechanical beasts.

"We have one shot at this," she announces, "Head towards Mana's position. Units: On your marks."

Three acknowledgements from her pilots, and not a single sign of fear. If she were any of their mothers, she'd be proud enough to burst. Shame she has to send them off to their deaths.

"Since our estimates are based on unreliable data, we're trusting on you to rely on your instincts. Head towards where you think the Angel will land. Mana is just the most likely spot."

A red aura appears around the Angel as it enters the atmosphere. Fire burns against it as the air protests its presence.

"It's time to begin the operation," she says, "Ready."

On the three screens of the three Evangelions, three power cables pop off with timed explosives.

"Go!"

*

*

Unit 02 takes off first, throwing up metric tons of forest floor as 15,000 tons of giant red robot kicks off into a sprint. Unit 01 follows, kicking off the side of the dam, sending up pulverized concrete as the will of the pilot translates to forward momentum. Unit 00 is last, a split second behind its siblings, kicking off a city street and running into the downtown heart of Tokyo-3.

To the layman's perspective, it is spectacle. Watching as the purple behemoth, in perfect runner's form, dashes down the street. Hands slicing through the air and knees pumping, only those at a distance can see the giant as it speeds through the city. Those too close would be carried along by the bow wave.

From the three starting point, three trails of dust and carnage spread, three giants accelerating the distance between the edges of the impact zone and the melee at its heart.

Firing off arcs of lightning from its gauntlet, Jet Alone dodges a flurry of flying rock, spinning the hammer in its hand before slamming it into and through the body of one of the probes, silhouetted by the explosion before turning, swinging the hammer up and launching another into the distance.

The left hand opens up, parting all the way up to the elbow, the hand receding in place of a focusing crystal before it lets loose a blast of arcing plasma, vaporizing two of the probes before a focused blast evaporates a third.

One jumps on its back. In the cockpit, Mana laughs. Vents on the back open up, spiked missiles jamming into the skin of the probe before exploding, throwing it off of it as Jet Alone turns, its eye glowing before a blast of white light calcifies three of the probes, a swings of the hammer pulverizing them.

"This is a challenge?" she asks, "C'mon! I've beat up kids for Milk Money tougher than you!"

*

*

"Unit 01 is clocking at 370 mph. Unit 02 is at 375 mph. Unit 00 is at 355 mph."

"Target is shifting its AT Field!"

On the main screen, the Angel's black shell cracks, breaks, and disintegrates, revealing a massive sphere of shifting colors. The colors flow over it from the red eye at the center, the flames around it forming into a shield.

"The Angel's increasing its descent speed," Makato announces, "We have a projected impact site!"

The map folds, an area highlighted with a circle. Misato swears, stamps her foot, and turns back to the screen.

"It f__ing played us!" she shouts, "Uri! You're closest! Rei!"

She turns to Yui. Yui nods.

"You have permission to let loose!"

*

*

In Unit 00's entry plug, a small, manic smile spreads on Rei's face. Her eyes glow red as her hands wrap around the butterly controls, the plug glowing red, then blue, then white. The connectors on her head flash, crackle and go silent.

"Understood," she says, with a slow, happy drawl, "Ready?"

Unit 00's run begins to speed up. As it leaves the city limits, it bends forward, arms behind it, legs pumping as the surface of its armor begins to glow red. As the dust in its trail becomes a plume, the air in front of it compresses, the single eye of the orange mecha flashing as the sonic shockwaves begin buffeting the ground in its wake.

*

*

In Unit 02's entry plug, Yuri's mouth hangs open.

Did Ayanami just go supersonic? He asks himself.

No time to worry about that, he thinks as he watches the fireball descend, willing his Eva faster, This is **MINE.**

Unit 02 runs. It runs over the hills and trees, in perfect form. It leaves a bow wave in its wake as its speed clocks over 400 mph, leaving a trail of debris for miles behind it.

*

*

The purple foot slams into the overpass, launching Unit 01 over the mountain as Shinji sees the two mile drop ahead. Curling into a ball, the Eva glides through the air before landing in a crouch and continuing its run. Gritting his teeth in the Plug, he wills it on.

you don't want to fail them

Eyes snap open, nodding. What was that, he asks himself, as he clears

the city limits, his conscience? Well, of course he doesn't want to fail them. If he fails them, they die. Right?

yes they will. do you want to protect them

"Yeah," he growls.

*

*

"Unit 01 picking up speed…it's at 600 mph," Makato calls out, "Unit 00 at Mach 1. Unit 02 at 420 mph. Angel at 12,000 meters and dropping!"

The heat shield around the Angel flashes and disperses. Flesh colored flame cracks through the skin of the rainbow ball, the entire sphere spinning and unfolding. Within seconds it goes from a sphere into a massive flower, a central circle flanked by two unfolding hands of five fingers. The colors rotate, folding out as a halo of red surrounds it, great and mighty fingers of silver and rose waving like hairs.

*

*

Red boots dig into the ground. Throwing up plumes of debris behind it, Unit 02 skids to a stop as it stares up at the Angel descending directly towards it.

"It's huge," Uri whispers. His Eva could fit in the center red eye of the thing before it. But, as it realized from his endless training in Eva, size matters not. And there is but one way he could halt the descent of such a beast.

"AT Field at Maximum!" he shouts.

Unit 02's arms extend out fully. As the sky becomes the Angel, it pauses, pressing against an orange hexagonal field running the entire length of the beast. Gritting his teeth, nostrils flaring, Uri extends his mind as far as the Eva will let him go, the angry presence beneath him fighting him for every inch.

Then the eye opens. It parts like a rotted melon, a face like a bird skull extending out, followed by a comically thin body as large as the Eva,

extending long, two fingered hands which reach through the AT Field like it was plastic wrap and grip Unit 02's hands.

They squeeze, and Uri grits his teeth as he feels every bone in his hand snap like dry wood.

"Heee~ey."

The AT field of the Angel flashes as Unit 00 clears the hill, the orange mecha landing in a crouch before launching itself through Sahaquiel's own barrier of protection and wrapping its hands around the head. Blasts of light slam and bloody red spikes dig into Unit 00, and in the entry plug itself her face contorts, baring fangs and eyes alight with red.

Orange boots brace against the surface of the Angel, and Rei pulls. The body of Sahaquiel tears, moving past the reed thin waist as the hairs on its wings folds up. Sprays of red issue forth, Unit 02 bent to the knees, digging into the ground as the wings begin folding back.

"Uri! I'm right here!"

The AT Field flashes. The Angel is forced up as Unit 01 stands next to Unit 02. Uri growls, gritting his teeth and fighting the pain as it releases in a strangled whimper. His arms feel like they are on fire, and his hands feel like they have had time with a power saw.

"The Core! Where's the Core?!" Shinji screams.

Rei squeezes, crushing the head. Orange LCL spills out, the body pulled past the waist. A flash of red that they can see past the body and they see it, almost as big as them.

"About f__ing time!"

One of the black probes slams into the body and explodes. A chunk of the skin burns off, exposing the core completely as massive foot steps mark Jet Alone's arrival, bits of black rock flaking off it as boot jets fire and it launches towards the core, the disc in the hammer's head spinning to life as Mana laughs maniacally through the comms.

"Hammertime, mother f__er!"

Jet Alone spins, two full rotations as it careens through the air, before 15,000 tons of forged mecha hammer slams into the core. Bits and pieces of core rain down, the struggling form in Rei's grasp goes limp.

A hairline fracture runs down the surface as LCL begins to drip, then flow.

The body, the miles long form of Sahaquiel goes limp, before folding in upon itself and with a low, pained moan, the struggle is over. Inch by inch, it becomes thick, orange and red liquid, raining down in a torrent down the hill, over them, and flooding into Tokyo-3 itself.

*

*

"Target is silent," Maya says, "Blue pattern is gone!"

Cheers erupt from Dogma. Shoulders, relaxing, Misato chuckles as Ritsuko slaps her on the shoulder.

"Good work," Akagi says, "Your asinine plan worked."

"Our asinine plan," Misato snickers, "You get partial credit whether you like it or not. Okay! Good work, pilots. Mana, I guess you get an Angel kill on your record. Now let's see if we can clean up this city!"

Four muted protests as Ritsuko begrudgingly goes about the task of ordering the large scale water pumps to be sent up, as Unit 01 already wades into the flooded quarter of Tokyo-3 to start picking up stranded roof top watchers.

Pieter Sohryu enters Dogma as Misato watches, walking up to Yui and whispering something in her ear. The brow of the unflappable head of Project E knits with confusion, then concern, nodding and patting Sohryu on the shoulder. On her heel, she turns, and walks out of the command center without a word, Sohryu on her heels.

*

*

The purple hand lowers towards the yellow tinged street level, and the six year old girl on the pad of its index finger extends her arm as the yellow tinged cat jumps out of the tree and into her arms. Raising her back to rooftop, she hops off to her parents as the cat mews in protest and embarrassment, something in cat language about there being fluid where fluid should just not be.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," Shinji's voice booms through the loudspeakers in the Eva's neck, *"We'll have the streets dry in a couple of hours."*

The parents wave back as Unit 01 turns and continues down the main street, Unit 02 manning the LCL pump that is currently vacuuming Sahaquiel's remains.

In the Entry Plug, Shinji starts as Uriel's face appears in his right eye, a scowl crossing the german pilot's features.

"This is embarrassing."

"It's the least we could do," Shinji responds, shrugging, "We flooded the city when we killed the Angel. NERV made the problem, so NERV should fix it."

Rei's face appears in his other eye, and Shinji begins craning his neck to get a clear view of the street.

"Well, this is sort of the first Angel that went gooey," she says, "*It's not like it's our fault-fault, but yeah. We kind of have to clean it up in our Evas or we clean it up out of our Evas. 'Kay?"*

Uriel shudders and cuts the connection. Leaning back in the chair, Shinji wills Eva on, grinning. Not a bad day's work. They saved the world, right?

yes you did

His eyes open with a start. He leans forward, peering over his shoulder.

"Who said that?"

*

*

The Section 2 agent behind her says nothing as Asuka enters the infirmary. The white, sterile walls are bereft of decoration, the only things that stand out from the endless white the table, the window, and the hanging florescent lights. Standing in front of the examination table, Yui folds her arms, Maya standing next to her as Asuka stands at attention.

"Your father wants us to look at your arm," Yui says, "We need to make sure it is dressed properly."

She nods. Her hand clench at her sides and her breath catches in her throat. The gentle, motherly smile on her face, Yui gestures to the table.

"Asuka. Sit on the table."

"Y-yes ma'am," she says, walking across the room and doing as she is told, taking off the beige uniform jacket. She rolls up her sleeve as Maya walks over, looking at the bandage with a sigh and a warm smile.

"We need to redress this," she says, turning to Yui, "We should check the whole arm, to."

Yui nods, folding her arms and sighing.

"Very well, I trust your judgement," she says, "Asuka. Take off your shirt."

Hands clench the ends of the table underneath her.

"W-what?"

"Don't worry," Maya says with a smile, "It's just to see how bad the cut it. We thought we might, which is why it's only us girls in here."

"R-really," Asuka says, teeth chattering as her eyes dart around and the door closes, "I-I…c-can't we t-t-take off the s-sleeve or-"

"Asuka," Yui says, hand on her shoulder, "Take off the shirt. That's an order."

Slowly, eyes half lidded and her breathing shallow, Asuka bows her head. She swallows down her dry, painful throat, lips parted in a low, scratchy breath. She nods, slowly, a motion barely noticeable.

"Yes, ma'am," she whispers.

Starting at the bottom button of the blouse, she moves up. Unbuttoning the top button, she releases the buttons on the cuffs of her other sleeve, and gritting her teeth, grinding her teeth as she clenches her eyes shut, she shrugs off the blouse, leaving her in her bra as she pulls her hair over her right shoulder and exposing her back and neck to the two women.

Yui's face turns blank, arms folded as she stares. Maya turns pale, her hands slowly coming up and covering her mouth as the younger woman's eyes go wide and her breath catches in her throat as the words leave her.

"Oh my *God,"* Yui breathes, "Oh dear God. What did she *do?"*

She extends her hand, fingers hovering over the back of her neck, over the three even circles and half circles flanking them. Her fingers curl, clenching into a white knuckled fist as her normally warm expression leaves her, her eyes focusing with cold fury as her eyes trace down the first of the long, grooved scar running from Asuka's shoulder to the small of her back, still angry and red. She mentally counts them, nostrils flaring as her breath comes in short, angry spurts.

"Get. Sohryu," she says, her voice low and filled with a cold fury Maya recoils from, turning to Yui and back to Asuka, "Get her to the Commander's office. I'm going to take that f__ing woman *apart."*

A low, pained, steady moan escapes Asuka's throat. She begins to rock back and forth, her eyes open and unblinking. Maya steps over, hands on her shoulders.

"Asuka?"

The girl screams. It isn't anger, or rage, or even surprise, just a scream. Pushing Maya away, she pushes off the table, darting to the door and yanking at the locked handle. Her eyes are bloodshot, wild, turning and pressing her back to it as Maya approaches slowly, hands out and open, palms up. Asuka slides against the wall, fingers digging grooves into the plaster as she retreats towards the corner.

Which is a distraction, Asuka realizes a moment too late, as the almost invisible closet door opens and a hypospray presses against her neck. Sedatives rush through her system, and Asuka's eyes roll up before she collapses into Ritsuko's arms.

"Good timing," Yui says, "Maya. Get Kyoko. Now. Get everyone."

Maya nods and runs out, her quick footsteps breaking into a run when the door closes. Yui walks over, cupping Asuka's face as even in drug induced sleep, ticks and grimaces cross it.

"Well," Ritsuko asks, "Now what?"

Yui grimaces. Her normal, placid demeanor leaves her. Her face twists

into that of cold, determined rage.

"Now?" she asks, "Now I'm going to *kill someone."*

Standing, smoothing out her labcoat, she turns and begins walking towards the door.

"Get her to a bed," she says, "Get her restrained. Doctor Akagi, I leave the rest to you."

And with that, she exits.

Chapter 13: Kyoko

A start, a sharp intake of breath as the world comes back into focus. Muted struggle in a vain attempt to sit up, feeling hands gripping the metal bed frame and the wrists up to the forearms wrapped in leather.

Asuka stares at the ceiling, her only sounds choked panic and sobs. They know. *They know. They know and they are going to kill Mother.*

*

*

The Section 2 agent does not leave the elevator with her. Snorting, Kyoko dusts off her lab coat, checks her PDA for any messages, and strides down the white metal hallway towards the double door of the Commander's office, or Mausoleum as it is more commonly referred to.

She does not have time for this. The entire problem was that Unit 02 got its hands mangled. It means at least a week of induced regeneration and re-plating the armor over the fingers and palms before it can even hold a Progressive Knife. The logistics are a nightmare, as no Eva has suffered this level of digit damage before.

The message was just to come to the office, there were things to discuss. Huffing, grinding her teeth, she swings open the door and strides in. The other bridge command staff are already there. They have been waiting. Ikari is behind is desk, Yui sitting on it, and the three bridge staff, the lieutenants, are talking with Katsuragi.

"I still have paperwork to file on Unit 02's repairs," Kyoko says with a groan, rubbing the bridge of her nose as she walks towards the desk, "It needs the forearms regenerated and hand armor replaced. Please, quickly, what is it?"

Her eyes snap open as the pair of hands come just short of her neck, stepping back as the three lieutenants collectively struggle to hold back Misato.

"You sick *BITCH!"* Misato screams, "I'm gonna take you apart like a

CHEAP F__ING WATCH!"

"Katsuragi!" Yui shouts, "You can do that later."

"You did get her gun, yes?" Gendo asks.

"Of course," Yui responds, "We did…we didn't take yours, though."

"What the Hell is going on," Kyoko shouts, turning from Misato's murderous gaze to Ikari, "I have *better* things to do than be threatened by your tactics commander!"

An almost animalistic growl from Katsuragi before she pulls free from Makato and Maya, arms folded and teeth bared as Yui takes the file folder from her husband's desk. She stares at the pictures inside, walking from the desk, slowly, to Kyoko. Raising her eyes and meeting Kyoko's furious, insulted gaze, she waits.

Her eyes narrow. The corner of her lip curls into the smallest resemblance of a snarl.

"Kyoko," she says, "Did you *really* think I would never find out?"

"Find out what?" Kyoko says, "Stop playing the damn game, Ikari. What in God's name are you talking about?"

Grunting, snarling, Yui shoves the file folder into Kyoko's hands. Snorting, she opens it. Her eyes go wide as she stares at the pictures, face twisting in confusion and then disgust, sneering at the images before closing the folder and staring at Yui.

"Is this," she starts, "This…is this some sort of sick joke, Ikari?"

"I'll show you sick you sadistic little-"

"Katsuragi," Yui snaps, Misato going silent under her gaze, "The Pilots are returning from sortie. Debrief them."

A grumble from Katsuragi and a dirty look directed at Sohryu.

"Yes, ma'am," she says, "Save some of her for me."

-

-

Chapter 13: Kyoko

-

-

His hands clench and unclench as Misato relates the events of the last couple of hours. He expected to find her waiting for them, but instead he hears…this. This report about what was done to her by her own mother. Part of him wants to climb back into Unit 01, find the woman and squeeze.

"~Flyyyyy me to tha mooooon/ And let me sleeeep among the staaaars~"

"Will someone turn that God damn Muzak off?!" Mana shouts.

"Don't worry about it," Misato grumbles, running a hand through her hair, "It helps the Evas sleep. I tend not to argue with the God-killing mecha about what constitutes easy listening."

"Sleep?" Mana asks.

"As Dr. Ikari said, better safe than sorry."

Uri's expression is blank, as if his brain is trying to process what they have just told him, and failing miserably. Mana is tense, her helmet removed and dripping link goo on the floor, and Rei is…

Rei's expression is completely blank. There is no hint of emotion on it whatsoever.

"Where is she?" Shinji asks, teeth gritted, just above a whisper.

"She's in isolation," Misato responds, "Look…I have to get back to the office to help with…well, to help with the situation. Shinji, she's in isolation because your mother's afraid she might attempt suicide."

Misato turns and walks back into the lift. Swearing something in English, Mana turns and walks towards the showers, Uri walking after her. His face looked deflated. Like the air, the will had left it. But that isn't important to him right now. Instead, he turns and begins walking towards the medical wing.

He has a plan.

*

*

Dr. Akagi was here to check up on her. There is an IV drip to keep her hydrated while she discusses things with someone, an assistant. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. Everything will fall apart now. Mother is going to die because she couldn't tell them the truth. She failed her, failed Mother, like she's failed everyone else every second of every minute of every hour of every day of every week of every month of *every year of her miserable uselesslittleLIFE.*

The voice, again. Now she recognizes it. Papa is outside with the Girl. He wants to see her, but Dr. Akagi says it isn't a good time. She needs to recover, Akagi says. She is on suicide watch, Akagi says.

She tries to shift in the bed. Her ankles are restrained, to. She has to find someone, make them listen. Make them understand about Mother, that it wasn't Mother's fault.

The struggles cease, muted as they were. The futility of this struggle, like every struggle over the course of her life, sets in. Tears begin streaming down her face as she closes her eyes, chest hitching with every sob. Silence reigns as once more, like she has done for almost every night since she was five, Asuka cries herself to sleep.

*

*

"I have limits," Yui says, "I have my limits. Kyoko, you have managed to cross every single one of them."

Kyoko says nothing, flipping between the pictures. Her face is unreadable, stoic, only her eyes having any expression as they trace down the lines, over the circles. The scars down the back start at the shoulder, red and deep grooves running down past the small of her back. There are five major ones, worked over as far as they can tell for a number of years until they went from cuts to full on depressions, into muscle but stopping before the bone.

"This…is not possible," Kyoko breathes.

"Believe it," Yui says, snatching the pictures from Sohryu's hands, "I'm had my doubts, Kyoko. Believe me, I've had my doubts. I always knew how valuable your Eva project was for you, but I never thought you'd be capable of this."

She cycles through the pictures, holding up the shot of the back of the

neck.

"Tell me why, Kyoko," Yui says.

Sohryu narrows her eyes, grabbing the picture, staring at it.

"No, no," Yui says, folding her arms as she circles her, "I can see why. It makes sense. At five years old, you go around my edict against human testing in the Contact experiments. You take your *five year old daughter,* shove her into the Entry Plug and fry her brain. Then you discard her, belittle her, let her grow into a broken shell while you lavish your gift from the Old Men with your praise and attention."

She leans forward, Kyoko's face unreadable.

"Am I right?"

Knuckles crack as Kyoko's fist clenches. She turns, eyes narrowed as the picture crumples in her hand.

"Do you *really* think I would use that girl in my Eva?" she asks.

She grabs the pictures, walking over and slamming them on the desk, turning back to Yui and snorting. Arms folded, Yui blinks, confused as Gendo takes the folder and begins perusing the pictures.

"An interesting fantasy," Kyoko says, pushing her glasses up her nose, "But that girl has *never* been inside an Entry Plug. I made it a point that she was not be be allowed to pilot, so why do you think I would use her, *her* of all people, to base my masterpiece on?"

She grins, squaring her shoulders, and waits. The response comes in the form of a closed fist to the face which sends her to the floor, and she looks up to find Aoba and Makato holding Maya by the arms, the girl screaming profanities as she kicks, held off the ground by the two struggling lieutenants.

The phone rings, and sighing, Gendo presses the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Commander, the Third Child is here and demanding entry into the isolation ward. We were given orders by Dr. Ikari and Dr. Akagi to not allow entry to Ms. Sohryu's room."

Yui swears, walking over to the desk as Kyoko picks herself up.

"Excuse me?" Shinji asks, *"But I happen to know the password that allows me entry to any part of the base."*

"Yeah? And what is that, Pilot?"

"Rei."

A sound of a dropping ventilation grate on the other side of the intercom and feet landing lightly.

"Wait, what does that-"

"Heee~ey."

"Oh, F__ SHE'S BEHIND US!"

Sounds of something hard hitting heads, unconscious security guards dropping and the intercom cutting off.

"Well," Gendo says, "This is interesting."

*

*

She wakes up in a cold sweat. She never cared much about appearance, was never given a reason to. The last time she even did something like going to a spa was only on Uri's insistence when she graduated. Her hair is sticky on her scalp and her face is wet, and her nose is stuffed. Her throat is dry and her body is sore, she can feel the cuts on her wrist from her previous struggle.

She doesn't mind being alone. She is used to being alone. Whenever Uri had to do tests for mother, mother would leave her alone. It is as it always was, but now she does mind. She does mind being alone. She doesn't want to be alone.

"This is the room?"

She has to be hallucinating. She could have sworn that was Shinji's voice. She really, really, really hopes it is him, but she doesn't want it to be him. She doesn't want him to see her like this, see her this weak, this useless, this pitiful.

"Crap. It's locked!"

"I have the key."

"Really, Rei? Where is it?"

A white clad fist bursts through the steel reinforced door. Feeling around, the owner hums a tune before grabbing the latch doorknob and yanking it down. Light creeps into the white, darkened room as the door opens, and she hears footsteps, hurried before skidding to a stop at the bed. Latches around her right wrist release first, and blinking away the tears, she stares into blue eyes.

"Hey," Shinji says.

She croaks a whispered greeting, fresh tears streaming down her tears as her left wrist is freed.

The ankles are next and he helps her sit up, sitting on the bed next to her, still stinking of the LCL and still in his plugsuit, and she realizes in that moment he headed here straight from the Eva. He rests his hands on her arms, Asuka noticing for the first time she is in a hospital gown, her body tired, her wrists and ankles sore, and he still came here first.

"I came as soon as I could," he says, "The cleanup took longer than we thought and…oh, God. Misato told me and…"

She lunges forward, wrapping her arms around him. Her face buries itself in his chest and her shoulders hitch, her entire body shaking as miserable, wracking sobs force themselves out of her mouth. His arms tighten around her, the material of the plug suit creaking as his arms encircle her, one hand resting on the back of her head, the tears and snot mixing with the LCL as he closes his eyes, burying his nose in her hair.

Rei is at the bed now, her hand resting on Asuka's shoulder. Her face is almost expressionless, save for the small downward twinge of the corner of her lip. She squeezes the shoulder once, smiles to Shinji, and walks out.

The cries turn to sniffling and Asuka pulls back a little, the pained smile on her face as he helps her sit up, helping her to her knees.

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice hoarse, painful.

"Don't be," he responds, "I swear, Asuka, if there's anything of your mother left when Mom is done with her…"

Her eyes snap open, hands over her mouth.

"Oh Gott," she whispers, "We have to talk with her. We have to stop them before they hurt her!"

"Stop them?" he asks, "Seriously, stop them? After what she *did* to you?"

"S-she," Asuka starts, and shakes her head, "Shinji, please. Y-you have to understand. Mother d-didn't do this to me."

He turns her to her. Scenarios start running through his mind, none of them pleasant, and Asuka squeaks in surprise when she sees the cold anger in his eyes. It is no surprise to anyone that he has indeed inherited the Look from his parents.

"Who *did* this to you?!" he demands.

Her eyes clench shut, head pitched forward.

"I did."

*

*

"They're what?"

"These wounds," Gendo says, holding up the picture of the scars, "Are self inflicted."

"What?!" Yui and Kyoko shout.

The two scientists stop, turn and stare at each other, then turn back to the Commander with scowls on their faces.

"The wounds are self inflicted," he says, narrowing his eyes and frowning, "All of them. The angle of impact and dragging is all wrong, especially with the back scars. Look at the shoulder marks. This suggests the back wounds were done over the shoulder, so the belt that was used couldn't be used by someone behind her."

He adjusts his glasses, chewing the inside of his cheek as he spreads the pictures out. The three bridge bunnies are behind him, Maya looking faintly nauseous, Makato and Aoba wearing their concern on their faces.

"I've beaten enough people to know what the marks would look like," Gendo continues, "These are all done from the front, over the shoulder."

"What about the neck," Yui says, "Did she just drag herself into an Entry Plug?"

Gendo pauses, turning to his wife. He pushes his glasses up his nose and gestures Kyoko forward with two fingers, grabbing her wrist and jamming his thumb down.

"Did you ever perform a contact experiment on your daughter?"

"No," she answers.

"Have you ever beaten your daughter."

"No."

He lets her go, turning back to the pictures, arranging them to the circles on the neck.

"This aren't electrical burns," he says, "This are made with an AC cigarette lighter. Look at the angle of the middle burn. The right is more faded than the left, which means this was done at an angle. If anything, I would say she was trying to *emulate* the effect of a Contact Experiment on herself."

Yui scowls, rubbing the bridge of her nose, Kyoko folding her arms and scowling.

"Why would she do that?" Maya asks.

"Attention," Yui sighs, "Psychosis. Abandonment issues. She gets yanked from her mother's big project and gives herself the mutilation that the experiment would have given her as a badge of honor. It gets worse over time, and…"

Yui shakes her head, grinding her teeth. Rubbing her temples and biting back swears and threats, she takes a deep breath and turns to Maya, staring directly at her, her back to Sohryu.

"There's scarring over her palms from just digging her nails into them. We knew she had issues…abandonment issues and confidence issues. She stutters, she seeks praise and she is slow to really bond to people, but we underestimated the full extent of what this has done to her. In

all honesty, I think Asuka would be *flattered* if her mother beat her."

Footsteps leading away and they turn, finding Kyoko swearing teutonic curse words as she mades a beeline for the door. She gets halfway across when the door swings open and Misato walks in, her right hand clenched into a fist as she glares at the woman.

"Katsuragi!" Yui shouts, "Let her pass!"

"Give me a reason," she growls.

"I said to let her pass!"

"I wasn't talking to you, Doctor Ikari," Misato says, narrowing her eyes as she glares at Kyoko, "Come on, Dr. Sohryu. Give me a reason."

A smirk crosses Misato's face, and she walks past Sohryu, walking past her and to the desk. As she approaches and she listens, Kyoko walks out, breaking into a run as she heads for the lift doors.

*

*

Sitting next to each other on the hospital bed, her knees up against her chest, his arm wrapped around her shoulders, they wait. She hasn't said anything since the admission. She waits for him to leave, to yell at her, to curse her but he doesn't. His hold on her becomes tighter, if anything.

"I don't know why it started," she says, her voice hoarse, squeaky, "I don't know why. I don't know why. I've been so bad, been so useless. I can't tell why I did it. I thought it would be like she wanted me to be, if I was burned like the Eva was supposed to burn me."

Closes her eyes, takes more deep, shaking breaths.

"She's been bad," she says, "We've been bad. I've been bad. I'm sorry. I'm s-sorry."

He pulls her closer, pressing his lips against her forehead, tasting the sweat and fear.

"I'd alright," he says, "It's alright. Do you want to go home?"

"Y-y-yes," she chokes, "I want to go home."

"Okay," he whispers back, rubbing her back, "I'll clear it with my Mom after we get home."

"You'll clear it with me now, young man."

Silhouetted in the doorway, flanked by Dr. Akagi and by Misato, Yui folds her arms and glares at her son, who does not flinch or hesitate as he stands up. He meets her gaze with his own, standing in front of Asuka out of instinct, hands clenching into fists and scowling.

"What are you thinking?" Yui demands.

"I can ask you the same thing, Mom," he shouts back, "I'm taking her home. I'm not letting you stick her in a dark room and just tie her to a bed like an animal!"

"It's for her own good," Yui says, rolling her shoulders, arching her eyebrows to stare down at him, "She could have been a danger to herself. Tell me, what if I refuse to release her?"

"Then I think your pilot corps' going to go on strike."

A sideways glance and Yui frowns, her tactics commander grinning.

"Katsuragi?"

"I'm siding with Shinji," Misato responds, "If it's okay. Ma'am."

Yui rolls her eyes, glancing at Ritsuko. Akagi shrugs, turns, and walks down the hall.

"Very well," Yui says with a smile, "I leave the responsibility to you, Shinji. Asuka, get dressed and Misato will take you home. We'll talk tomorrow. Is that alright?"

"Yes ma'am," Asuka whispers.

Another glance between Yui and her son, and the head of Project E turns on her heel and walks away, her frown turning into a smile as she clears the hallway, out of earshot and sight.

"Good boy."

*

*

He waits for minutes before he makes up his mind, standing outside the door to her office. He wants to charge in, screaming righteous indignation…but it would be hollow, wouldn't it? He has no moral high ground. Yes, her actions lead to this, but if he spent more than a couple hours in his daughter's life over the past sixteen years he could have helped.

Fingers rapt on the door, and there is no response. He hears creaking, the moaning of a swinging light fixture. The door is unlocked, he finds with a testing push, and he opens the door. The first thing that catches his eye is the nobel prize, broken and at his feet, having been thrown across the office and against the door.

The second he sees is Kyoko, sitting at her desk and staring at photos, a bottle of scotch and empty shotglass next to them. He knows what the photos are, of course. The entire *command staff* knows what they are, and until they found out the truth he had to convince Fuyutsuki not to order security to drag her out and shoot her.

"Hello, Pieter," she says, "Come for your pound of flesh, as well?"

He sighs, walking in. Not invited but not unwelcome. She is leaning on her elbows, intent on the pictures, whispering oaths to herself as she stares.

"Well, you're too late," she says, "Everyone's gotten their fill. Katsuragi wants to shoot me. I owe my life to Commander Ikari."

"And you?" he asks.

"I want to just hang myself and call it a day," she whispers, face contorting, eyes wide as she stares at the photos, "Guter Gott, Pieter. What have I *done* to this girl?"

He doesn't respond, doesn't say a thing. Hands folded at his waist he watches as she takes up the picture of the back of Asuka's neck, looking at it in detail, in intent before dropping it and slumping back in her chair.

"Do you know why?"

"Why what?" he asks.

"Why I yanked her out of the program," she says, "I was afraid. I took her out because she could have ended up like that: Having her soul sucked out of her *through the back of her neck!"*

Face buried in her hands, she moans, running her hands through her hair as he watches, biting his lip and waiting.

"God," she moans, "God *damn* it. I kept telling myself I could fix things when the Angels were dead. I kept rationalizing it, but the truth is that it's f__ed up. I've f__ed up so badly, haven't I?"

"Is that what you think?" he asks.

"Yes," she says, "Yes, it may be. I have no idea how to approach her, but…it is like my presence hurts her by me even being there. I need to…think. Do you think I need that?"

He sighs, shaking his head, not out of disagreeing but out of the lack of words to convey. Waiting, watching, he lets her sit back in her chair, looking at him, maybe past him.

"God help me," she says, "I've turned into my mother."

She pushes herself up, shakily standing, eyes bleary and blurry as she tries to circle the desk and fails, nearly falling and finding him catching her. She chortles, slapping him on the shoulder as her groans collapse into giggles and laughs.

"You're drunk," he says.

"I'm f__ing *hammered,"* she laughs, "Just get me to my car, manservant."

He grunts an acknowledgement, throwing her arm over his shoulder.

"Fine, but I'm driving," he says, and starts carrying her out.

*

*

The lift door opens, and Yui stares at the sole other occupant. Raising an eyebrow in appraisal, she takes a step in, turning and standing to the front and right of her husband as she presses the button leading down to the sub-command levels, just above the Limbis Zone and Terminal Dogma.

"So," she says.

"So," he responds, "Shinji is even more protective of Asuka. Katsuragi

has become maternal towards the both of them. Uriel is wavering in his loyalty to his mother and Sohryu will be less likely to try anything as she knows we are watching her closely."

"Yes, indeed," she says, a small chuckle as she folds her hands behind her.

"Pieter will be easier to keep around," he continues, "As he is now concerned for his daughter, given the circumstances. And Kyoko now owes me her life, giving me ownership of a human being."

Yui grins.

"I love it when a plan comes together."

His white gloved hands begin rubbing her shoulders as a grin crosses his features.

"Did you plan to have Maya punch Sohryu?" she asks.

"I set up the placement of people in the office," he responds, "If she wasn't actually attacked, she would have suspected it was for show. And your going into full outraged maternal mode? Brilliant."

A grin crosses her features, fingers adjusting the glasses on her nose.

"I only channeled what I felt before I recognized they were self inflicted," she says, "But you…you played every member of the command staff like a fiddle. And you still left them thinking you are nothing more than my arm candy."

She turns around, resting her arms on his shoulders.

"I only did that," he says, "Because in all aspects, my skills pale to yours."

"And you're still doing it now," she says, "Playing with me to get what you want."

Her grin becomes wider, showing teeth before her foot slams the emergency stop button.

"You *magnificent bastard."*

And things go from there.

*

*

The doors to the elevator open in the garage, and Pieter and Kyoko stare at the space where her car should be.

"You had it shipped over from Berlin?" he asks.

She nods.

"Shame."

The air is still hazy where the car was parked, and steam still lazily hovers from the fire suppression system. Tentatively, he walks over, Kyoko standing in the entrance of the elevator and staring as her ex-husband stares at the scene, stares at the thing which at some point in the recent past was a car.

It was a nice car, to. He remembered seeing it in the garage. It was European, kind of sporty, and had a nice stereo. Right now, it has none of those things, at least nothing that wasn't mostly melted by the fire.

He stares at the hood, reaches out, and picks up the stand out object.

A squeaky mallet.

"Someone doesn't like you anymore," he says, "Let's take a car from the motor pool."

*

*

Security quickly caught the people responsible for the arson of Dr. Sohryu's car, and as such, Shinji, Asuka, and Misato had to detour from the drive home to the local NERV precinct to post bail for all seven culprits.

"I had nothing to do with this!"

"You came along."

"Because you tied me up, Kirishima!"

"Aaaand you didn't complain."

"Because you gagged me, Ayanami!"

Misato rubs her temples, Asuka sighs, and Shinji rolls his eyes. Showing solidarity was one thing, but trashing someone's property was another. Touji shrugs, Hikari shrinks on the bench next to him, and Mana and Rei are both beaming at what they believe is a productive night's work.

Uri is fuming but stops when he sees his sister, even if he is sitting a little too closely to Mari, and Kensuke resembles a lost dog at a pound.

Asuka leans over to Shinji, staring at their glasses wearing friend, who is rocking back and forth and muttering something.

"Shinji," she says, "Why is Kensuke worried about being…a 'prison bitch?'"

*

*

Buttoning her collar, Yui rolls her shoulders with a sight, sitting against the elevator wall as Gendo takes a chilled bottle of red wine from the hidden compartment underneath the button facing and two glasses, pouring for her as they share a smile.

"Well, this worked for the best," she says, "I must say, you are like a fine wine. You get better with age."

"I think half the reasons I run these gambits is because they turn you on," he chuckles, sipping his wine as he sits down next to her, "They'll thank us for this, in time. When should we move to the next phase?"

"Let them cool down," she says, shuffling next to him, hand on his knee as she rests her back on his chest, "Shinji and Asuka should be returning to their apartment after bail is posted. Let Pieter pursue his ex wife. And, of course, Rei knows the truth about the situation with Asuka and her mother."

"Of course," he says.

"Because you told her."

His face screws in confusion, raising an eyebrow.

"I thought you told her," he responds.

She sits up, stares at him. They stare at each other, and their eyes go wide before she starts digging through her discarded lab coat for her cell phone.

*

*

One thing lead to another. A muted thanks lead to an invitation into the apartment, which lead to sharing a drink which lead to a muted asking to not be alone after a day this disastrously bad. Which lead to the first read contact she had in sixteen years, not counting one night stands, and two very lonely people sharing a bed.

He is out like a light, and she is snoring, despite the occasional tick of muted guilt crossing her face. Her face is mashed up against the pillow, him behind her, arm wrapped around her, as Pieter and Kyoko are well and truly drifted off into sleep. It would take a good bomb blast to wake them, which is why they don't see it or hear it.

Two eyes open in the shadows of the room, flat against the wall, glowing crimson and watching them.

Surrounding the two eyes, another eight eyes open, also blood colored.

Around them, another thirty two eyes open, also colored like a deep, vengeful tide.

"~naaaa/na na na nana na na/nanananananananaaaa~"

A phone clicks open.

"Hellooo~oooo…"

"Rei, it's Yui. Sohryu's not responsible for Asuka's scars. Asuka just has more emotional problems than we thought."

The phone clicks shut. The eyes narrow, every other one opening wide in tune with a possible eyebrow raising to consider the information. The thirty two eyes blink shut first, followed by the eight. Then the two remain, and they sag, lowering, before closing and disappearing.

Chapter 14: Evangelion DA FLAMETHROWAH

"So, about…ten years ago, right?" Misato asks, "Shinji gets sent to live with his aunt and uncle, Rei gets adopted, and Asuka starts *cutting herself."*

"It's not cutting, at least not from a clinical perspective. Cutting is, psychologically, normally associated with the individual being loud, obvious, and melodramatic. Asuka is none of those things. This was her trying to emulate what she perceived as an ideal state. IE, being used in a Contact Experiment. The other scars are from further incidents down the line where she emulated what she believed to be an ideal relationship between herself and her mother."

"You mean an ideal state where her mother beat her with a belt?" Misato asks.

Walking down the hallway next to her, Ritsuko nods, tapping her PDA's display screen to bring up reports.

"Sounds about right," she says.

"Is there a single person in the building without parent issues?"

"Shinji," Ritsuko responds, "I would say he's about the only one. Even if he couldn't live with him, both his parents made a point to involve them in his life so he knew he was not abandoned. Hence, Shinji ended up with probably the healthiest sense of self of all the pilots."

Misato snorts, grumbling something involving a German scientists and a blowtorch.

"Yeah, makes sense," she says, "He doesn't get angry, does he?"

"He's like his mother," Ritsuko responds, "He works his way out of situations. Anger is a tool he doesn't find the need for. I think if he ever does get angry, that's the point we run for the hills."

The lift doors open beside them, the two stopping and staring as the newest Pilot training, Mari Makinami, walks out. Dressed in a crisp, pressed NERV skirt uniform, what they find themselves staring at is the colorful tailed cap on her head.

"What is that?" Misato asks.

"This?" Mari asks, taking off the cap, "Oh, this was from Dr. Ibuki. It's the prototype the PR department made."

"It looks like the Angel we just killed," Misato says, "Why are we making Angel caps?"

"PR department," Ritsuko says, "NERV has all the intellectual property rights to the sale of merchandise based on the Angels and the Evangelions. You didn't know about this?"

"I didn't," Misato says, "PR department? We do *merchandise?"*

"Maya runs the department," Ritsuko says, tapping her PDA before taking Misato's and tapping on her GPS program, "Here we go. This should lead you there. They should be finishing your action figure prototype, soon."

With all the incentive she needs, Misato breaks into a run down the hallway, swearing under her breath as she turns and disappears around the corner. Pushing her glasses up her nose, Ritsuko grins.

"This should be good," she says, and walks after her.

-

-

Chapter 14: Evangelion DA FLAMETHROWAH

-

-

It is Sunday, so there is no school and Asuka volunteered to do hours at NERV to give herself some free time during the week. Shinji was already gone when she woke up on the couch, having left her breakfast in the microwave and a note to call him if there was anything wrong.

It seems Dr. Ikari's…well, for lack of a better term nurturing had rubbed off on Shinji, and she hopes to see him when she gets out of NERV this afternoon. Smiling to herself, folder held in both hands, she passes silent coworkers and waits for the lift to arrive.

The door opens and she stares into eyes much like her own. Kyoko

stares at her, lips a thin line, hands thrust in her lab coat pockets and glasses reflecting the light to keep her from seeing the red in her eyes.

"Asuka," she says.

"Hello, Mother," Asuka responds, avoiding the gaze.

"Never embarrass me like that again," Kyoko says, "Are we clear?"

"Yes, Mother."

With that, Kyoko walks out of the elevator and past her, turning and disappearing behind the corner. Sucking in hard, sharp breathes, Asuka walks into the elevator and pushes the button for Dr. Ikari's floor.

*

*

The large, double sliding doors have the words "NERV PR. DEPARTMENT, PROTYPE TESTING FACILITY" emblazed above them, standing at the end of a hallway Misato has never seen before. Steeling herself for whatever horrors await, she slides her key card through the slot next to the door and walks in.

And screams.

*

*

The orders were simple. He was to be given twenty four hours of time to himself in Tokyo-3, with a nominal security detail trailing him but not interfering. Then, the Chairman excused himself to direct a bake sale at a local school building.

The private plan lands in the airport fifteen miles north of the city limits. Twin engines power down, and a small army of black suited men, each identical with pale hair and opaque sunglasses file out, followed by a young man with ash hair and golden red eyes, dressed in a white shirt and black slacks.

He looks around, rolls his head back and takes a deep breath of the processed airport atmosphere, walking a step before his detail towards

the customs agent and the gate.

"Welcome to Tokyo-3," the woman says, hands folded behind her and smiling, "Mr-"

"You don't need to know my name," he says, "In fact, you never saw me, or my agents here. And you'll let us pass."

She presses a button and the gate opens. Kaworu Nagisa and his entourage walk through and he enters the city of Tokyo-3 proper, a smile on his face.

He made the decision to take this trip a week ago, after perusing reports of the happenings going on in the Fortress City. Things caught his eye, and not just through the simple actions of the pilots, but also the images he was given of them. One of them caught his interest, and even if his destiny will be terrible, his form is still that of a teenage boy.

As he is lead to his car, sitting in the back seat as his guards take the front seat and the black SUV comes to life, he reaches into his pocket and takes out the picture, unfolding it to the image of the one he has come here to meet…and maybe more.

"I look forward to knowing you," he says, "Ms. Ayanami."

*

*

Misato Katsuragi stares into the room, standing in the open doorway. The factory line stops, halted in its tracks upon the scream of the Tactical Operations Commander's entrance. Ritsuko Akagi walks up next to her, opens her mouth, and stops, having gone completely silent.

Maya Ibuki stares back.

Maya Ibuki, dressed in a blue and black plugsuit with blue bunny ears on her head, stares back.

"I can explain," she says.

"No, I don't think any explanation will cover this entirely," Ritsuko says, "Maya, have you been chosen by the Marduk Report?"

"Um…no."

"Then I'm really not sure if it fits," Ritsuko responds, tilting her head, appraising her assisting in the skin tight latex bodysuit as Ibuki blushes, "So…as Misato would say if she could speak, 'What the f__?'"

Misato's mouth hangs open until Akagi pushes it shut, taking her privilege as a friend and slapping her across the face. Eyes blinking, senses returning, Misato walks in and looks Maya up and down.

"What Fresh Hell have I just walked into?" she asks.

Maya blinks, turns to the waiting engineers and workers and nods to the man in the orange overalls at the central controls.

"Back to work," she calls.

The assembly lines continue moving, faithful employees going about their work of assembling items as Maya leads them into the three story tall room. Ritsuko raises an eyebrow as she walks behind Maya before clenching her eyes and rubbing her nose, walking up next to Misato.

"What is this?" Misato asks.

"NERV has property rights to anything to do with the Angels or the Evas," Maya explains, her walk elongated before she stops and wiggles her seat, picking at it, "So NERV's merchandising department manufactures action figures, novelties, and other kitsch items to supplement NERV's operations budget."

They stop at a metal crate at the end of the center assembly line. Misato begins rummaging through it, reaching in and taking out a six inch tall toy figure. The Figure is pale, in a white and black plugsuit molded onto the form, with light blue hair and red eyes.

She reaches in and takes out another, which is in a red plugsuit and otherwise identical to the first.

"Why do they all look like Rei?" she asks.

"Rei is NERV's mascot," Maya responds, wincing as the two woman turn on her.

"Wait, what?" they both ask, staring at each other and then back at Maya.

"She's NERV's public face," Maya explains, lightly chuckling and shifting her seat, "Well, it was sort of a 'work with it' thing because as much as Section 2 would not want her status as a pilot to be public…"

"This is Rei we're talking about," Ritsuko sighs, "Why just Rei, though? It's well known at his school that Shinji is a pilot, to."

Misato takes out a black plugsuited Rei, then a blue version. Tossing them back in, she walks over to the crate on the next line to the right, and yanks out Sachiel. A *plushie* Sachiel.

"What the *F__?!"* she screams.

"We probably will put out action figures of him, to," Maya responds, "Come to think of it; he wouldn't be too uncomfortable with the prospect. We'd have to clear any of Uri with Dr. Sohryu and any of Mana with the JSSDF, but we could always go for alternates and female variants by having Asuka versions. It would boost us up in the collector's market."

Misato climbs over the conveyor belt and bolts to the next crate, screaming obscenities before holding up the Ramiel buckyball Cube.

"How long has Rei been the mascot," Ritsuko asks, "Because I'd feel uncomfortable if we were making action figures of a five year old girl."

"Rei's just been doing this for the past two years," Maya explains, "And that's how long we've been really doing manufacturing, to. Since the Angels arrived, keeping the Evas secret's been moot. And besides which, we only use Rei because she holds a resemblance to the previous mascot."

"Who was…"

"Dr. Ikari."

Ritsuko sighs, palming her face as Misato walks over with a Gaghiel sleeper pillow almost as big as she is.

"Please tell me you're doing this with the Commander's authority," Misato says, "You're a nice girl, Maya. I'd really hate it if you were taken out and shot."

"This was Dr. Ikari's idea," Maya responds, hands up defensively, "She approves of all of this. Since she was the original Contact pilot for

Unit 01 before they cancelled the human testing, she also decided to make NERV more public. During the earlier years, when constructions of the Evangelions were at an earlier phase, she would hold press conferences in a plug suit prototype and basically sold the idea of NERV. When I came aboard, one of the duties I took over as the Evas were finished was this department."

"Still doesn't explain the plug bunny suit," Misato deadpans, shifting the weight of the Gaghiel pillow and finding it squeaking.

"Product testing."

Maya shifts again, grunting and pulling at something behind her with a wince.

"The plug suit material is lightweight, very durable, fireproof and water proof," she explains, "When stripped of the electronics it's actually a very useful material. We've been developing it for firefighters, rescue workers, race car drivers and fetish models."

She wiggles again, muttering something under her breath.

"Problem is, it's tight," she says, "And really hugs. It's like I'm wearing nothing at all."

Ritsuko looks at the ceiling as Misato folds her arms and raises an eyebrow.

"Back up," she says, "Fetish?"

Maya mumbles something about catering to an all age demographic before Misato walks past her and walks to the craft at the furthest conveyor belt. Maya runs after her, walking with elongated strides as Ritsuko tries to avoid staring directly as her assistant's spandex clad ass.

Katsuragi reaches into the crate, rummages, and takes out a six inch long replica of Unit 01's entry plug. She twists the control at one end, and the plug begins to vibrate. Switching it off, she stares at Maya as the young woman goes beat red.

"You are *so* repressed."

*

*

Knuckles rap on the door and Ryoji Kaji looks up from a psychological report to see Uriel Sohryu standing at attention. Kaji purses his lips, waits, then sighs.

"Stand down."

Uri's shoulders sag slightly and he waits.

"Can I help you, pilot?"

Uri nods, clicking his heels together.

"Inspector Kaji," he says, "I was made aware that you are considered an expert in dealing with matters related to women."

Kaji takes the small glass by his computer, clinking together the ice cubs and takes a sip, grinning.

"I take it you haven't talked with Katsuragi lately, have you?" he asks.

"Sir?"

"Never mind," Kaji sighs, "So, women troubles? Have to say, Pilot, I heard you were of the 'don't really care' column when it came to the ladies. What can Agent Kaji help you with in that area?"

*

*

The actual situation, as it turns out, was series of misunderstandings and honest mistakes which spiraled out of control until something caught fire. While an intellectual, empathic, and high minded individual, Kaworu Nagisa is also a sixteen year old boy who was directly cloned from Lorenz Kihl. And something…else…was added in, but he shared many of his father's proclivities.

So, when shown the profiles of the three current Evangelion pilots – the Jet Alone was not of Adam, after all, and therefore of no importance- he took a look at the profile of the Third Child and decided a meeting would be interesting. He recognized the Second Child from earlier in his life. And the First Child got…special attention from him. It was his mistake for not paying attention to the 'psychological attention' part of the file in favor of surveillance folder.

Instead of paying attention to the parts highlighted that read 'sociopathic tendencies,' his mind veered more towards 'Those legs go *all* the way up.'

In the Game of Destiny that his brethren must engage in, the end goal is to become the ultimate form of life. There are many ways to do this, and most of them involve contacting and consuming the Alpha. The other way, the other possible way to make their Representations viable, is to become a viable species.

In other words, have offspring, delay the inevitable.

As the only female Nephilem he knows of, she would be *perfect.*

So, he mentally dominated Kihl, chartered a flight to Tokyo-3, and had Rei picked up to be taken to the city's local five star hotel so he can woo her over the next twenty four hours until his natural charms convince her of the necessity of breeding. That is a perfectly sensible idea, one which he is sure the Chairman will approve of once he returns to Germany and his estate.

In fact, the black SUV in front of him has the object of his current plan. He feels positively *giddy* in anticipation of what is to happen.

A giddiness which he retains, albeit to a lesser degree when the head of one of the bodyguards is jammed through the roof, the car swerving left and right as a pale fist shatters the moon roof and she climbs out. Somehow, despite him being in the back seat and the windows tilted, she stands on the roof and waves at him, smiling.

With a single, fluid motion, she handstands on the edge of the roof before flipping off, hanging in the air, and mule kicking the SUV hard enough to make it flip and hit the highway divider before leaping off the overpass and taking off into a run on the street below.

This plan may need some *work.*

*

*

Quick footsteps behind her and Asuka turns, a forced smile on her face as she sees her brother come to a stop. He grins, hands folded behind

him, and clears his throat. She smiles in response, hands folded in front of her as he shifts, hands shuffling something behind him.

"Frau Ikari agreed to give us both the afternoon off," he says, "Would you like…"

He glances to his side, inching out the yellow flash card in his hand so he can see the text.

"…to get some Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream?"

Another inch to the next phrase.

"My treat?"

Her smile grows wider, and she nods.

"That…t-that sounds great," she says, "I'm j-just going to change, is that alright?"

He nods, and watches her walk away, turning the corner and disappearing. Taking out the packet of yellow flash cards, he flips through them, nodding that he has kept them in numerical order. In his right pocket are the red set of flash cards, the one Inspector Kaji gave him for 'later,' but since he is a trusted expert on the matter of cheering women up, they will be useful.

He seemed curious. But of course, this was all to cheer up his sister. Why else would he ask for advice on women? And he would know that, to. Of course he would.

Walking down the hall, he whistles a German ditty, unaware of Mari watching him from the doorway of one of the bathrooms.

"Is there something weird going on here?"

*

*

The phone clicks on and plays a military march, and Kensuke Aida glances at the number before resigning to fate and opening it.

"Hello?"

"Heee~ey. What'cha doin'?"

"Making sure I don't have a criminal record," he deadpans, sitting at his desk as he types on his laptop, "What do you need, Rei?"

"I need the quickest path to the Harbor Container Yards. 'Kay?"

He pauses, brings up a GPS program, and sighs.

"Should I ask why?"

*

*

Outpacing cars, running alongside a speeding motorbike and waving at the rider who stares at her, Rei pumps her legs a little faster and runs down the street, looking at the texted directions on her cell phone before turning, skidding and kicking off down a side street and towards the dead end alleyway.

Darting up, over and onto the roof of the apartment, she flips onto the roof and takes off into a run towards the towering cranes and ships of the Tokyo-3 harbor.

The cars pursue, and Asuka watches them speed off. For some reason, she thought she saw something familiar, but Uri shrugs, checks the notecards, and takes Asuka's hand to leads her along.

"That was odd," she says.

"Well, it is an odd city," he says, "Enjoyable, but odd. Has Katsuragi taken you clothes shopping, Asuka?"

He has little outside of his uniforms and plugsuits except for a few formal outfits to wear, so he is still in the beige windbreaker and slacks, but she changed to a blue pullover and long skirt and knee highs which he doesn't recognize.

"S-she did," she says with a smile, "The day after I arrived, really."

"It looks nice on you," he responds with a smile.

The ice cream stand is a quarter mile from the Geofront entrance, having come highly recommended from the Inspector for its 'ambiance,' which he has little knowledge of the meaning of, and something about being secluded from prying eyes. He is not sure why such things are necessary to cheer up his sister, but the Inspector

knows what he is doing.

Asuka sits down at one of the tables outside the stand that has a colorful umbrella situated over it, and Uri walks over to the counter, perusing the notecards and quickly memorizing the next sequence of phrases. Two cups of ice cream in hand, he walks back and sits across from her, Asuka giving him her warmest smile.

"T-this is nice," she says.

"It is nice because I have your company," he responds, "By the way, have you been working out? It looks like you have lost weight."

*

*

Three SUV's park and a dozen black suited men climb out, quickly moving as one into the overshadowing metal container yards outside the Tokyo-3 docks. Trailing behind them, his smile more subdued than it usually should be, Kaworu stares into the darkness and for a moment, swears it stares back.

"She is here somewhere," he says, "Don't hurt her."

The bodyguards stare at him. They know better than to point out that she mule kicked a car and can run up sheer walls, and simply nod and begin spreading out. Six teams of two file in, each taking a different entrance between the great and massive containers and walking, guns out and ready, twitching at the slightest sound.

Each are identical, and from what is known in the higher echelons of NERV, they are most likely clones, vat bread for this purpose. Meaning she doesn't feel guilty about this at all.

Under the shadow of a triple stacked set of metal containers, two guards pass by one as the side door pops. They turn, guns and laser sights aimed, peering into the darkness. A cat comes out, mewing before running away, and the two guards relax.

Until a pair of pale hands reach down and pulls them both up with a yelp.

Two teams run to the spot, stopping and waiting, circling around as they watch and observe. Only one of them actually screams when

their two missing comrades drop down, hanging from their feet from an overhead beam, unconscious and with their sunglasses jammed up their noses.

"Where's their guns," one asks.

Silence falls. The solemn, sudden realization that Rei Ayanami is now armed hits them. There are sounds in the distance. More screams and thuds, and something that resembles a growl.

Running, they move as one, the four identical guards skidding to a stop several rows down to find the sound gone and another four of their comrades hanging from the rafters.

"Who the Hell are we tracking?" one asks, *"Batman?"*

"I hope," another answers, "That means she won't kill us."

Another shift, another sound. They turn and aim to find the last two unaccounted for guards running towards them, skidding to a stop and breathing heavily. Hair matted and faces slick, their red eyes are wide in sheer, hopeless terror.

"Run!" they scream, "F__ING RUN!"

The four aim their weapons in the darkness, standing still, waiting for movement or confirmation or just sweet, sweet death. Something moves and they open fire, automatic gunshots echoing in the night. The bullets ricochet, going wild as they scream, the two runners running for the exits.

Something moves in the shadows. And enraged, scared gray cat runs by them. Sighing, they lower their empty guns.

"Heee~ey."

They turn. Looking up, they find the face of a smiling Rei Ayanami, who happily waves at them.

Looking down, they come face to face with 900 pounds of Polar Bear.

"We're right next to the zoo! Ain't that great?"

*

*

It is good to see his sister smile, and even better to see his sister laugh. He has no idea why the cards suggest 'getting to third base' or 'do you like Twister,' so he ignores those because they make little sense. He also does not know what 'tatas' means, which confuses him.

"So," he asks, "What do you do on your time off?"

She shrugs, face pensive.

"Well, I work on projects for Dr. Ikari," she says, "When I can, I end up with my other friends."

"Ah, the people who dragged me off to set Mother's car on fire," he responds.

He grins, chuckling.

"They are good friends, then," he says, "You have lovely eyes."

She pauses, tilting her head. Her brow furrows and he takes the moment to glance at the cards.

"This makes no sense," he says to himself, "Why would I see unborn children in them?"

Turns back to her, smiling and shuffling the cards under the table.

"Well…t-thank you," she says with a confused smile, "S-Shinji says so, to."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Ikari," he says, toes curling, "He has…been good to you?"

She nods, her smile becoming more confident as she leans on her elbows.

"He really has," she says, "Um…have you talked with him?"

"I believe I threatened him. About what I would do if he hurt you."

She frowns. Her brow knits and she digs her fingers into her palm as she stares at him and he looks away.

"It was during the blackout," he responds, "He was…questioning my relationship with you. Ayanami interrupted us before we could come to blows."

"I-I see," she says, and begins to stand.

His hand presses on hers. His face turns passive, almost blank.

"Don't go," he says, "Please. Hear me out, Asuka."

She sighs, sitting down and bowing her head, hands folded in front of her. Sighing, cracking his knuckles in his nervous habit that he picked up, he waits and for a second, considers checking the cards.

"He was right," he says, "I have not meant to, but I have hurt you. But I do love you, Asuka. You are beautiful, and intelligent, and when I heard what had happened to you I was…furious. Not just at Mother but at myself. Does that make sense?"

"A-a little," she stammers, looking up, meeting his eyes, "A little."

Silence falls over the table, both smiling, honestly, for what may be the first time between them. He squeezes her hand, and she smiles back, the curling of her lips not forced at all.

"Hey there. Can anyone join or is this just a creepy inbreeding party?"

Mana Kirishima stands at the table, hands on her hips and smirking as both turn to her and sputter, Asuka's face screwing in confusion as Uri stares at her.

"I'm…sorry?" he asks, more out of confusion than outrage.

"The cards," Mana says, "I saw you using them. Lemme see them."

She reaches over and snatches the deck of cards from his lap, reaching in his pocket as he protests and taking out the set of red file cards.

"Ah, the testing stage," she says, filing through the cards, "Many a career shittered by the need to cheat the test. Not bad, Uri. Not bad. He's got technique, but he's also got something that counts as a third leg."

She folds the yellow cards and slides them into her jeans pocket, holding up the stack of red.

"Tell me, Uri," Mana says, "When you went to Kaji for advice, did you tell him it was your *sister* you were trying to cheer up?"

"No," Uri protests, glancing between Asuka and Mana, "I just assumed he knew I wanted to cheer up my sister and why are you talking to us?"

She hands him the first red card. He glances at it and his eyes go wide.

"That's disgusting! She's my *SISTER!"*

*

*

Kaworu waits, hearing nothing. Tentatively, he walks into the container yard, golden red eyes glancing from side to side as he breathes slowly, watching and waiting for movement. They are professionals. They should have found him, then he can get back to this business of using his great and mighty charm to woo her.

Right?

"Hello?" he asks, "Ms. Ayanami? Are you alright?"

A bit of movement. He glances as a gray cat walks by his feet and relaxes. Then he turns and stares into the unconscious face of one of his guards, hanging by his shoe strings from the beam above.

"Heee~ey."

The voice echoes like the wind, and he sees a flash of red before turning to the exit. Just as a container drops and blocks it off.

"I can seee~ee you."

He backs away, breathing sharp and quick, backing into a container and feeling something on his shoulder. He looks up. Just water. Just water…yellow water. Three of his guards are tied to the beam, their backs against it, and one wetted himself.

Breaking into a run, he runs deeper into the yard, finding two guards tied side to side and flat against a metal crate, their hands in each other's pants despite being unconscious. Running past them, eyes glancing to every angle, looking for every sign and every motion, he skids to a stop in front of a sleeping polar bear and a ring of six unconscious guards resting against it.

"Good…good God," he whispers, "Miss…Miss Ayanami, can you hear me?"

"Mm hm. What'cha doin'?"

"I…just wanted to talk," he says, "I…where are you?"

Silence. He grabs a guard's gun, holding it at ready, backing from the bear and staring at it, his heart beating out of his chest, pumping through his ears.

"I just wanted to talk," he says, "I just wanted to talk. I just wanted to talk!"

More silence. The gray cat walks by him, stares at him, and runs away with a hiss.

"Where are you," he shouts, "WHERE ARE YOU?!"

He turns. His eyes lock with the eyes of the hanging upside down Rei Ayanami, who grins and shows teeth.

"Right here."

Grabbing him by the shirt, she lifts him into the rafters.

*

*

Yui and Gendo Ikari nod as the ring tone finally ceases and the click on the other side of the line tells them the phone is finally answered. Leaning on his desk in the Commander's office, Yui clears her throat.

"Rei?" she asks, "Section 2 said you were abducted. Are you alright?"

They both step back at the sound of the sharp, high pitched scream on the other end of the line. Turning to each other, they quickly realize the owner of the scream is male.

"Are the kidnappers alright?" Gendo asks.

"Let me down," the voice on the other end screams, *"Let me down! Please, please, LET ME DOWN!"*

"Say it," Rei shouts, *"SAY IT!"*

"YOU'RE THE ULTIMATE LIFE FORM! YOU'RE THE ULTIMATE LIFE FORM!"

The phone clicks off. Yui slides off the desk and wrings her hands,

staring at Gendo. He stares back, taps his fingers on the desk, and sighs.

"I'll have Section 2 ready the quicklime."

The phone beeps, twice.

"Commander? Chairman Kihl is on line 1. He says it's urgent."

*

*

He watches as the door to the apartment closes and walks back to the elevator. She was happy, today, for the first time in a while. As much as he understand psychology, he knows some of it is but a mask, while there is still pain…too much pain underneath.

The doors open and he looks up to stare into the eyes of Mari Makinami, who smiles in response to his.

"So," she says, "Big date with your sister?"

"Mistaken circumstances," Uri says with a sigh, "And she is my adopted sister, as well. It would still be wrong, though, as I see her as my sister, if that helps."

She grabs his arm, pulling him out of the elevator with a grin on her face.

"Nah, it's alright," she says, "Say, I know you live in the geofront, right?"

"Well, yes."

"Great. Walk with me there," she says with a wicked grin and a glint in her eye, "And I can tell you were those pick up lines Inspector Kaji gave you could use some work."

He grins, nodding. His hand squeezes her own, his fingers interlacing with hers. A small look is passed between them and he laughs. Then he takes a closer look and raises an eyebrow.

"Why are you wearing the last Angel on your head?"

Almost as if in response, the alarms blare and the catapult near the docks comes to life, launching a metal crate into the Pacific Ocean.

*

*

Misato took things into her own hands, packed up the adult novelties into the largest crate she could find and had them launch it via Eva catapult into the Pacific. Maya looked heartbroken but carried on, and Ritsuko stares at her computer and sighs.

"It's like I'm wearing nothing at all."

A grimace, image of her assistant's nicely toned posterior in blue spandex passing her vision.

"Nothing At All."

Shaking a bit as she walks.

"NOTHING AT ALL."

She sighs. Rubbing the bridge of her nose and slumping back into her chair, she rests her folded hands on her lap and shrugs.

"Stupid sexy Maya," she says, "Well, alright. I guess I'm a lesbian."

A bump against a wall and Ritsuko turns, just as Maya quickly gathers up her folders and runs back into the hallway. Akagi could swear she heard the girl squeal.

Chapter 15: Creating Children through Science

The long and short of it was that Rei discovered that Kaworu Nagisa was a Nephilem, and as such could regenerate much like she could. So, when she showed up with Nagisa in tow via Section 2, Ritsuko made a list of everything she did to Nagisa during their 'alone time' before the SEELE charter plane took him back to Germany.

Cheerful, happy, pleasant to be around and a nice conversationalist, he nonetheless flinched when Rei stared at him. The reasons became evident when Akagi compiled and listed what Rei did to him during their altercation.

"Ocular virginity?" Gendo Ikari asks, "What does 'Loss of Ocular Virginity' mean?"

Akagi walks around Ikari's desk, leans in, and whispers the answer in his ear. Misato, Maya, and Pieter watch as Ikari's face turns pale and his eyes go wide.

"That is just *wrong."*

*

*

The school bell rings, the classrooms assemble, and Hikari Horaki bellows the morning routine of 'Stand-Bow-Sit' as Shinji promptly opens his notebook computer and finds a message waiting for him from Ichi. Grinning, he opens and email and raises an eyebrow, glancing to the empty seat next to him. Asuka hasn't returned to school yet, still recovering from the weekend. His mother and Misato's recommendation.

"I have heard that your friend has had a bad weekend," the message reads, "Can I start emailing her?"

"Okay," he types back, "How do you know about that, anyway? Do you work for NERV?"

"In a sense," she writes back, once again responding to the email almost the moment it is sent, "My parents work for NERV. I find myself there a lot. You seem to be happy with your work at NERV."

He sighs. He looks around, staring at the other students. If her parents work for NERV, she *should* be in this school, shouldn't she?

He sees Hikari typing, sees Mana staring at the teacher as if she could get him to explode. Rei isn't here, and Kensuke is typing something on his keyboard. It couldn't be him, could it? Has he been pen palling with Kensuke Aida for the past ten years?

He really hoped Ichi was a girl, to.

"Okay, you can start emailing her," he writes back, "Her email is…"

-

-

Chapter 15: Creating Children through Science

-

-

The door to the apartment opens, and Asuka gives off an uneasy smile as she stares into the gaze of Yui Ikari. The older woman smiles back and waits for Asuka to stand aside and let her enter, taking a seat at the chair in the living room and gesturing to the couch. Nodding, Asuka sits down, hands folded in her lap.

"I understand," Yui says, "That you and Shinji slept on the couch when you came back home after the…incident. Why?"

"I didn't w-want to be alone," she says, biting her lip as she stutters, "A-and we knew Misato didn't want us in the same bed. S-so he suggested the couch."

"I understand," Yui responds, "I can't simply keep your mother from interacting with you. As much as a problem as you have with her, she is one of the three heads of Project E. Do you want to keep working for me?"

Asuka nods, quickly.

"Y-yes, I do," she says, "I r-really do."

"Good," Yui says, and sighs, "Shinji's worried. He really is. I have to say, my son is quite taken with you, Asuka. I don't think I've ever seen him so concerned with another person before."

Asuka nervously smiles, folding her hands tightly, her cheeks creeping red.

"My son doesn't connect with people easily," Yui says, "And he certainly doesn't go out of his way for other people like he does for you. I think you've managed to make him a better person, Asuka. Remember that I appreciate that."

Asuka nods, tapping her fingers as Yui stands and pats her on the shoulder.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she says, "Go back to school tomorrw, Asuka. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The door shifts and shuts as Yui walks out, footsteps echoing as she walks to the elevator. Sitting back on the couch, Asuka lies back and stares at the ceiling. Uri was good to her yesterday. She always associated him with Mother, how Mother ignored her in favor of Uri. But…that is flawed. It has to be.

Mother gave her a roof over her head.

Mother paid for her college tuition in full.

Mother took her out of the Eva program, yes, but why was it? She kept hearing those accusations when they found the scars and the marks on her neck. They accused Mother of using her in a contact experiment and

The contact experiment, in theory, achieved Primary Synchronization between the Solenoid material of the EvangelionType Core and the pilot. Possible side effects of unstable synchronization experiment: Full integration, partial integration. Partial integration involves direct imprinting of the mental patterns of a pilot on the Core via direct electrical impulses (theoretical Soul) being removed from pilot.

Blue eyes open. That's it.

*

*

"Attention students. Ikari, Shinji, please report to the Vice Principal's office."

The doors to the office open as the later afternoon sun shines through the windows. What should be the vice principal's office has been co-oped for today, and Shinji finds himself staring at his mother and Dr. Akagi.

"Mom?" he asks, "You needed to speak with me?"

"We both do," Ritsuko says with a sigh, "Shinji, close the door. Make sure it's locked. We're in a dead zone of surveillance and we need to speak with you about something urgent."

He nods, closing the door and bolting it. He takes the chair across from the desk and sits across from his mother.

"Shinji," she says, "Who has been misisng from NERV since you came here?"

"I'm…sorry?" he asks.

"Most of the GEHRIN staff transitioned into NERV. Except for one. Who is missing?"

He thinks, furrowing his brow, and turns first to Ritsuko, and then to his mother.

"Auntie Naoko," he says.

"Correct," Ritsuko sighs, "My mother. I find it odd you haven't been curious, as I remember hearing she was quite taken with you."

He grins with a laugh, scratching the back of his head.

"Well, I haven't seen her since I was six," he says, "So, yeah. I do remember her a little. She worked with my parents and seemed to have an endless supply of lollipops. I just guessed that she moved on to another project."

Yui sighs, biting her lip as Ritsuko pats her on the shoulder.

"Shinji, Naoko Akagi committed suicide around the same time I sent you to live with your aunt and uncle."

His smile disappears. His face turns ashen and his eyes go wide at the new nugget of information, his hands curling into balls as he waits for her to continue.

"W…what?" he asks, "What happened?"

"My mother was not…all there," Ritsuko sighs, "We saw her journals and there was something quite wrong with her. She committed suicide because…well, because she was obsessed. With your father. There's no easy way to explain it except that she was obsessively in love with him and had a plan."

"And that plan was part of the reason we sent you away," Yui says, "And part of that involves Rei."

He waits. Hands grip the armrests of his chair and he breathes, deeply, before he centers his gaze on his mother.

"What plan?" he asks, "And what does Rei have to do with this? I know she's…odd, but…"

"Because of what she is, Shinji," Yui says, "Now you must listen. And not repeat any of this to anyone. Because I am going to tell you *who* created Rei. And why. And why that is exactly why you were sent away for your own safety."

*

*

Her hand hovers at the office door and waits, and for a moment Asuka considers the situation. She wants to talk to her, but this was impulsive. Going from the apartment to NERV-1 just to get confirmation that her mother cares? Interrupting what could be important work?

She knocks on the door, and the door opens. The room is empty, only a desk light on, her desk the mess she expected it to be and the rest of the office almost bare save for the recliner by the book case, where she guesses Mother sleeps most nights when she can't make the time to go home.

She walks in, spotting a red folder on the desk. Standing in the doorway, she considers the options available to her, staring across at the folder and seeing a picture on the folder. A picture, she realizes

from the light reflecting off the bend, of her.

"Asuka."

Turns, breath catching in her throat to come face to face with her mother.

"What are you doing?" Kyoko asks.

"I-I came by t-to ask you something."

Kyoko sighs and walks in, walking past her and closing the folder.

"Well, ask it," she says, "I have a meeting with Commander Ikari in ten minutes and they are all still sore with me over what you have done to yourself."

Asuka pauses, feeling the venom on Mother's voice. Whether directed at her or herself, she can't tell.

"Mother," Asuka says, "D-did you take me out of the Eva p-program to keep me from having a partial integration with Unit 02?"

Kyoko looks up from behind her glasses. The woman goes silent, hands gripping the folder. Her gaze levels on Asuka and Asuka visibly folds in on herself, averting her gaze and trying to shrink out of sight.

"Do not ask me about that," Kyoko says, her voice low, steady, and dangerous, "Never speak to me about this subject, are we understood?"

"Yes, Mother."

She turns, and Kyoko is in front of her, her mouth a thin, straight line.

"And if you must know," she says, "I kept you out of my Unit 02 to keep your mind from being stuck in it. I would not damage my masterpiece like that."

With that, she walks out, disappearing behind the next corner. Hands clenching into fists, breaths sharp and short, Asuka closes the door behind her and walks into the corridor. She walks towards the lifts, towards the exits of the Geofront so she can return to the apartment. To Home.

Her mind folds on itself, conflicted. Should she be…happy? Technically, it means her mother cares for her, doesn't it? She did not want her to be crippled by Unit 02. But only because she's *useless* for

it, right?

"Hey."

Turns and locks eyes with green ones behind glasses. Mari Makinami smiles, a flighty, chipper grin as she greets her. Asuka forces a smile back, trying not to let any words about *THAT GIRL* come out of her mouth, to maintain what dignity she has fleeting scraps of left.

"Hi," Asuka whispers.

"You're looking in the dumps," Mari says, "I just finished a synch test. How about we grab some lunch?"

*

*

"I found Rei about ten years ago, after the operations were finally done," Yui explains, tapping her fingers on the desk with a sigh, "Naoko had a tendency of disappearing off the radar for hours at a time, and I was concerned. So, I trailed her. She had a lab tucked into an alcove of Terminal Dogma, just a few levels above the absolute bottom of the Geofront. There, I found Rei."

Shinji watches with rapt attention, saying nothing. Needing to say nothing.

"Shinji, as nice a person as Naoko was to you," Yui continues, "She had…issues. I read a journal she had kept in her lab. What was in it was…disturbing."

"My mother sabotaged the Unit 01 contact experiment," Ritsuko says, "She wanted to make sure your mother was completely absorbed by Unit 01. She was obsessed with Commander Ikari and wanted him to herself."

Yui sighs as Shinji stares at Akagi, waiting for him to turn back to her.

"When I survived the experiment," Yui continues, "She turned to Plan B. She was going to make a child, based partially on my DNA and partially on the organic material the Evangelions are constructed from, and let her loose. She would kill you, and kill me, before she would be destroyed by Naoko, who would claim your grief stricken father for herself. When I found Rei and alerted your father, Naoko

threw herself off the highest level of Central Dogma. Rather than destroy Rei because she was to an extent my daughter, I convinced your father to take her in."

"But since she was created to kill me, you had to send me away," Shinji finishes, "To make sure, right?"

Yui nods.

"And since you are aware of what Rei can do, I couldn't bring you back," she adds, "Not without having to put her out. It wouldn't be fair to either of you. Do you understand?"

He nods, silent.

"And Rei is no more a danger to you than anyone else," she continues.

"I know," he says, "You wouldn't put her in an Eva if she was, would you? So I guess…it's a little much to take in, Mom."

She nods.

"I felt you deserved to know," she says, "If you'll excuse us, Shinji, Ritsuko and I need to talk. You should probably head to NERV. I think Asuka is there."

He nods, and walks out. The door shuts, Ritsuko walking over and locking it before she turns to Yui.

"I think he wanted to apologize to you," Yui says.

"For Mother?" Ritsuko asks with a grin, "Please. I don't think there's a single person who's sorry that old hag died. Does he get to find out how she really died at some point?"

Yui shakes her head.

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it."

*

*

Since her earliest memory, she has hated this girl. She could never say why, but she hated this girl. This girl, Mother said, was everything you are not and therefor she has to be your enemy. This girl was the

result of your Father straying, betraying you. This girl was the result of your Mother being cast aside, of you being cast aside, made into the worthless little girl you are.

The girl sits across from her. She should grab the knife from the silverware, end this. Sure, it's plastic, but it will do the job, albeit slowly. End the charade, end the torment, maybe then Mother will stop pitying her.

"Hey, 'Ska?"

Looks up, and Mari smiles.

"How's things going at home?" Mari asks, "Papa's been asking and he never seems to find himself in the same room as you."

"It's…fine," Asuka says, "It's fine."

Her smile fades, pursing her lips.

"You don't like me very much, do you?" the glasses wearing girl asks, picking at her salad, "Don't blame you, though. As much as he spoils me, my father's been something of a sod to you."

Asuka blinks, staring at Mari, and with a sigh turns back to her soup.

"So," Mari says, "Since we're sisters-"

"We're *not,"* Asuka hisses.

"We *are,"* Mari cuts in, "Didn't your Mum ever tell you?"

Asuka stares at her, mouth open in an unspoken question.

"I was born three months after my parents married," Mari says, "We're not step-sisters, 'Ska. We're *half*-sisters. Are you seriously telling me your Mum never mentioned this to you?"

*

*

NERV-Bethany, somewhere in the Black Sea off of Russia. A new day dawns and a door opens as the distinguished, older man with receding silver hair and a well kept white mustache walks in, adjusting his blue tie and labcoat as automated sanitizers spray him with mist.

"Good morning, everyone," he shouts in a thick German accent.

"Morning, Albert," the perky blonde in the NERV skirt uniform says, handing him a thermos of coffee as he walks past, "Your patient is waiting!"

Whistling to himself, the scientist walks through the white strip-lit hallways of Bethany, deep underground, underneath a ring of abandoned missile silos built in the latter half of the Cold War.

Sipping the coffee as he enters the central chamber, Albert waits as the great carousel spins around, the opening into the central chamber mawing before him. Blowing air out his lips, sipping his coffee, he walks in and waits as the glass tube containing his patient rises.

Inside, the eye blinks.

"Well, good morning," Albert says, "Shall we begin?"

*

*

For some reason, her mother raised her to hate, to murderously hate her own half-sister. Those thoughts ring through Asuka's head as Mari stares at her, the normally chipper girl silent and contemplative. She picks at her salad as Asuka stares at her soup, tapping her fingers in tune with her thoughts.

"If it helps," Mari says, breaking the silence, "My Pa was always a little bitter towards your Mum. Until recently, when my Mum left and left him holding the bag."

"I guess it does," Asuka says, "I guess it does. A little."

"And I guess both our parents have been sods in this case," Mari says, "Look…I can't say what my Mum did was right, but I don't hold it against you. I can only ask that we get off on a better foot. Is that alright?"

A trembling smile, hands balled into fists. She clenches her eyes shut and says nothing, staring at the soup, staring at the red liquid as her eyes lose focus. She has to hate the girl, and Mother said so. But Mother wants her to hate her own sister, and why would she do *that* and

"Well, in any case," Mari says, patting her hand and bringing her out of her stupor, "Since we're sisters, and since my father's something of a *hopeless* case on this, I've got to take initiative. So, what's your schedule for the rest of the day?"

She looks from side to side, then back and Mari.

"I…was going to back home."

"Well, you'll do that later," Mari says, sipping her canned tea, "First thing's first. You're getting a makeover."

"I'm…sorry?"

"As much as I'd love to have Unit 02 step on your Mum," Mari says, "I figure the best way I can strike a proverbial blow is by taking you out. You need a new outlook, and I think a new look. Make Shinji chase after you a bit, right?"

Fingers tap on the table. For some reason, she has an idea that she will not be allowed to simply bow out of this activity. And for some reason, she is wondering if she would want to.

"O…kay," she says, "I guess."

"Not the cheeriest outlook," Mari says with a smirk, "But we can work on that, to."

*

*

"Well, subject remains nominally responsive," Albert says, tapping his pen on the clipboard, "And borderline oblivious to outward stimuli. No response to electrochemical therapy or directed shocks, and the regeneration rate remains, as before, at zero level."

Placing the clipboard down, he taps the button on the wall and the keyboard and monitor fold out.

"Now," he says, "Let's get back to alpha wave bombardment, shall we little guy? Let's see if that puts some pep in your step…"

*

*

Somewhere along the line of asking where Asuka went and finding out where she went, he ran into Uri. As it turns out, they were going to the same place, and after some uneasy greetings the two find themselves sitting on a bench outside of the local NERV-sponsored spa, waiting for the girls.

"So," Shinji says.

"So," Uri responds.

The two sigh in time, staring at each other and then back at the doors.

"I think Touji has to do this a lot, to," Shinji says.

"Isn't he the stupid one?"

"He's also the whipped one."

A groan from the two. Shinji sits back as Uri leans forward, his elbows on his knees and as Shinji notices, still in his NERV uniform. Sighing, checking his phone and the time, he rolls his head and puffs hair through clenched teeth.

"Do you own any clothes other than that?" he asks.

"Would I need to?"

Tapping his feet, clicking his tongue, bored out of his mind. Shinji finally leans forward and turns to Uri.

"Thanks," he says.

"For, Ikari?"

"Last night," Shinji says, "Look…we don't have to get along, but what you did for Asuka made her day. Made her week, really. Maybe more than that. But…she was happier than I've seen her…I guess forever."

A small smile graces Uri's lips.

"I guess I should thank you, to," he says, "You make my sister happy, Ikari. I appreciate that."

Shinji grins and pats Uri on the shoulder.

"You look like you could use someone to listen," Uri says.

"Just…heard some things today I'm not comfortable with," he says, sighing, "Ever find out someone you cared about wasn't…what you thought she was?"

"I have a feeling I am finding that out more and more," Uri says, a small smile crossing his features, "I don't think I've really talked to Mother since we found out about Asuka. What about you?"

"My aunt wanted to kill me."

Uri stares at him.

"The woman who raised you?"

"No. My godmother," Shinji says, "She wanted to kill me, and my mother, and have my father to herself. I try wrapping my head around it, but I can't. How does someone do something like that?"

Uri sighs, staring at the doors.

"How does my sister scar herself for years on end without anyone knowing," he says, "How does my Mother ignore these signs in favor of her work? How do I not notice that the girl I pilot Eva to protect is hurting?"

Another sigh, another glance at the doors. A small smile and a glancing at Ikari and he pats him on the shoulder.

"People are flawed," he says, "And we do not know each other like we could. But once the lines of communication are open, the only thing we can do is try."

"The hedgehog's dilemma," Shinji says, "People want contact, but are afraid of being hurt."

He grins, folding his hands on his lap as the doors start to open.

"The only way to solve it is to reach in."

*

*

"Well, this is interesting," Albert says, "Very interesting."

Scratching his head, turning around to the canister, he walks over and

kneels down, watching as the eye watches him back. It is odd, he thinks. There is a definite reaction, but he can't be sure what the reaction from the eye and the mass on it is. But still, if it can

I

react to some level of stimuli than it can certainly

I

show some level of awareness.

"What was that?" Albert asks himself, walking over to the console and bringing up the intercom, "Tracy? I think we need to cut power to the experimental chamber! Something is not right with the patient!"

*

*

Asuka smiles. It is the warmest, most genuine smile he has ever seen on her face, as she stands in front of him in the open doorway of the spa. Her cheeks are practically glowing, her eyes slight as his own eyes go wide, and a small laugh escapes her lips as he nervously scratches the back of his head.

"And for the crowning touch," Mari says, "In addition to the facial treatment and conditioning, I also found that NERV's merchandizing department does a little in the area of hair decorations. The contact barrettes, I think are the nicest touch."

Her hair is falling into a loose braid down to the small of her back, two cherry red barrettes on the top of her head, clips parting her mane into an elegant, triple wave. Uri laughs, smiling, showing teeth and wrinkles around his eyes.

"Oh, Mother's going to *pitch a fit,"* he says with a laugh, "But I find myself not caring. I'll let Ikari do the talking for this, thank you very much."

Shinji glares at him and relaxes, turning back to Asuka with a smile. He walks over, finding his hands in his soon enough, and finds his smile matching hers.

"I think you look…stunning," he says.

"Really?"

"Really," he says, "So…I was going to go back to the apartment and cook dinner. Think they'd like to tag along?"

They turn, to find Uri already being interrogated by Mari on whether he thinks *her* makeover looks nice and trying to back away from anything conclusive. The sun is already setting over the Fortress City, and the builds are already moving to their night time configuration.

God's in his Heaven.

All is right with the world.

*

*

The hand taps the controls. One eye already bleeding, fried in its socket from just looking at it and his glasses hanging off his nose, his hair seared off half his face and choking on his own bile, he stares at the screen.

"Please, this is NERV-Bethany," Albert says, "NERV-1, please listen. Base has been compromised. You have to

I

"Prepare for the worst. The experiments have reached a

I

"Unstable stage and

I

"Subject has shown signs of awareness."

The light behind him as growing in intensity. His assistant is a mass of burnt leather on the wall, the other scientists reduced to component gasses when it began to stir. The light is blinding, as he turns back to the central pillar, as the final seals are broken.

"Final system unlock," the gentle voice whispers, "Access granted to Acheron."

It is a gentle, motherly voice, he thinks. It is also the last voice he will ever

*

*

In the artificial island in the middle of the Black Sea, night becomes day. The circle of silos surrounded by great pillars of black metal are still as the light beneath it glows brighter and brighter. One by one, the covers of the tunnels deep into the earth pop open, each Seal giving way to the terrible force beneath it.

A pillar of light blasts through the center of Bethany, the black metal buckling and melting as the first inches of the prisoner emerge. Inch by inch, foot by foot, it rises as the island buckles and melts, the pillars collapsing as it rises into the air. Two eyes long subdued by light and power open for the first time in so very long. He is now aware once more.

I AM THE ALPHA. I AM THE OMEGA.

In NERV-1, changing into her plugsuit, Rei Ayanami's eyes go wide and she clutches her head.

I AM THE ORIGIN AND THE DESTINATION.

In the Cages, Unit 00 and Unit 02 raise their heads. Unit 01's eyes glow yellow.

AND I HAVE BECOME AWARE ONCE MORE. YOU ARE, ALL OF YOU, GARBAGE.

All around the world, nine incomplete beasts open their eyes and breathe silent roars. Throughout the world, still dormant, the remaining Messengers become, for one brief moment, aware. And shudder.

Kaworu Nagisa's eyes go wide and he stands up straight in the middle of the estate grounds, his silent reverie failed as he recognizes the voice from the memories before his waking life.

"Father."

And over the remains of NERV-Bethany, in the boiling Black Sea, the

Giant of Light holds out His arms and roars the waking scream

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

I am he who is named "I am."

My feet shall walk the breadth of the Base Earth once more

My mission shall not end with death.

I shall seed the ground with new truth

And that which has come before and from Me shall bow in worship.

I am the Alpha. I am the original.

I am the Creation of God.

I am the first of the Messengers and I am coming for the one who is my Opposite.

I am ADAM.

I AM COMING.

-

-

-

The light reaches a blinding crescendo, the roar a righteous scream. Circles of white surround the Giant as the six clawed wings extend from its back and surround it, and in a single moment, as even the remains of the island are evaporated by His very presence, He is gone.

And every alarm in Tokyo-3 goes berserk.

Chapter 16: That Which has Come Before

"I won't lie to you. What we're facing is going to be beyond anything you've dealt with before. As many of you know, the cover story of a meteorite striking Antarctica is a lie. What is coming to Tokyo-3 is the First Angel, and the being that was the direct cause of Second Impact. We've named him ADAM."

The satellite photos shift to a 3-D hologram of the Black Sea, where a white cross of light is where the artificial island of NERV-Bethany once stood. Mana grimaces, realizing what sort of magnitude of power has to be necessary, while Uri stares impassively and Shinji winces.

"From what satellite imagery tells us," Misato says, "ADAM is about the size of an Evangelion. Past that, we know very little. Get to your plugsuits and get to your Evas. We're launching momentarily. Dismissed."

They file out, footsteps echoing in the hallway and leaving Misato alone in the briefing room as she powers down the holo table. She looks up to find Shinji still there, face pensive.

"Something wrong?" she asks.

"It's him, isn't it," he says, "This is the Angel that you saw?"

"The one that killed my deadbeat dad," Misato says, a grim smile on her face, "I'd recognize it anywhere. Yeah, it's him."

Her hands brace on the table, eyes narrowed and hands curling into fists.

"So," she says, "This is my chance for revenge, isn't it? I can just throw you kids at that thing and hope you take him down with you. What do you think?"

"I think I trust you enough to keep it together," Shinji responds, "Can I?"

A small, knowing smile crosses her features.

"Let's hope," she chuckles, "Tell you what, Shinji. You give it your all and fight as hard as you can, and I keep my head together and we all go home. How does that sound?"

He salutes, grinning, and walks out.

-

-

Chapter 16: That Which has Come Before

-

-

Twelve black monoliths come into being in the dark room, and into the white spotlight at the center Yui Ikari steps. She directs her glare at 06 first, before turning back to 01 and giving it, and the geriatric cyborg behind it, her full attention.

"ADAM has awakened," she says, "He is making a series of teleport jumps that give him a trajectory of Tokyo-3. We presume he is coming this way to mate with Lilith, a scenario which we presume will cause a Third Impact that will wipe out all sapient life on the planet."

"NERV-Bethany's failure is a black mark," 05 intones, "The First Angel is more powerful than we believed."

"Once again, Man has failed to properly leash its God," 08 adds.

"We will try again," Yui says, "And this time we will succeed. Chairman, we have a contingency to channel the excess mass into a Dirac Sea. All we need is the device which can cause ADAM to regress into its embryonic state. We need the Lance of Longinius."

A murmur amongst the assembled monoliths.

"You overstep your bounds, Dr. Ikari," 06 intones.

"And yet there is no other weapon capable of slaying the First Angel," 11 answers.

01 remains silent. The others bicker for a moment more before they blink out, leaving only Yui and 01. With a flicker, the monolith disappears, and Lorenz Kihl stares across the distance from Germany to his most trusted scientist.

"You will receive the Lance," he says, "Upon two conditions."

"We don't have time for this, Chairman," Yui responds, folding her

arms underneath her chest, "And most certainly no time for politics. If ADAM is not stopped, we die."

"We always have time for this," Kihl growls, "Or do you forget your place, Doctor Ikari? I will not have the head of Project E dictate terms. I will remind you that I have been sorely tested these past days due to your pet abomination's proclivities."

Yui smirks.

"What Nagisa does on his own time is not anyone's concern but his own," she says, "And it is certainly no mark against you, Chairman. You are the one who gives us marching orders, after all."

A small, mechanical chuckle.

"Very well," he says, "First, ADAM's remains are to be remanded to SEELE."

She nods, inwardly cursing her luck. One less road they can take.

"And the second?"

"It is something you and those around have suggested I do many a time, Doctor Ikari," he says, without any hint of emotion saved the crooked twitch on his dry, mummified lips, "You need only lick my boots."

The hologram blinks out. Taking her foot off the kill switch for the conference room, she walks out. Her husband is waiting for her, inclining his head.

"Kihl's attempting to tighten the leash," she says, "He wants ADAM, he wants to know he has control. Otherwise, I'm sure he'll have Nagisa or something else comes in with the Lance after our Evas get destroyed and pilots killed."

"I see," he responds, "So we have to supplicate ourselves to the Old Men."

A small, wicked grin crosses her face. She cracks her knuckles, walking down the hall with him beside her.

"Like Hell," she says, "I think we need to teach the Old Men a lesson for a change. Get Akagi and get her started on Scenario 581. We can have that done and prepped within two hours."

"And then?" he asks.

"And then," she says, stepping into the elevator, "We're going to *kill ADAM."*

And the doors close.

*

*

The brown haired ten year old girl is still limping, walking with a cane as she is led along by her sister. Hikari grabs her sister's hand, running along with her as the alarms continue blaring as they move down the street near the Tokyo-3 specialized hospital.

"Nozomi," she says, "We need to hurry up! Dad's waiting for us at the shelter!"

"Sorry, Sis," Nozomi says, hopping along in pace with her sister, "I just had to-"

There is a flash of light and a crack of thunder. In the distance, over the horizon, a giant of light vaguely resembling an Evangelion appears. From the mountains in the distance, a volley of missiles and cannon shells fly out, splashing ineffectively against a white, watery wall that appears in thin air.

Lazily, languidly, the giant of light gestures towards the mountain. There is a flash of light and a roar of thunder and screaming air, and when the light clears the mountain has been cleaved in two.

"Run," Hikari says, "Run, right now."

Nozomi nods, whimpering, and runs with her sister towards the metal overhang of the shelter entrance.

*

*

"The Angel is approaching the outer Tokyo-3 perimeter," Maya announces, "Pilots are on lift towards Eva cages."

Standing in the middle of Central Dogma's command level, Misato

glares at the glowing form. She turns her head slightly as the hand rests on her shoulder, seeing Ryoji Kaji standing next to her.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

"I've waited seventeen years for this," she says, "It's taking every ounce of self control not to order a f__ing ICBM launch on that thing."

He nods, squeezing her shoulder.

"Don't lose it, Katsuragi," he says, "Maya? Any change?"

"None yet," Maya responds, grimacing, "Wait…we have movement! The Angel has begun moving!"

*

*

The foot moves, lifting off the ground and hanging in the air. Almost lazily it comes down, cracking pavement and sending debris up into the air where it hangs. The next foot comes down, and around the heel the ground crystallizes, turning brittle and cold as the air fills with ice crystals and windows become frosted and shatter.

Its movements are lazy and minimal. The air ahead of Him crystallizes; power going out for blocks ahead of the giant as it enters the limits of Tokyo-3. Light bends and draws into His form, the two black circles on the head intent towards the heart of the Fortress City.

In Dogma itself, they stare. To the NERV Command Staff, it is as if time itself has frozen around ADAM. The great colossus seems motionless despite its slow, inevitable march. To them, it is as if Tokyo-3 and everyone within it was moving towards ADAM.

"Pilot Sohryu reported that he found Rei in his locker," Makato says, "First Child, Second Child, Third Child reported in Entry Plugs."

"Jet Alone Prime has started up," Kaji adds, "All systems green."

"Package has been set up at Section 003 at Tokyo-3 Center Square," Shigeru announces.

Misato nods. Gritting her teeth, sucking a sharp breath through them, she calms her nerves and waits. The platform behind her rises, Ikari taking his position as Yui walks in and stands next to her.

"Let's get this on the road," she says, "You know your positions. Ready!"

*

*

Four plates open at the center of Tokyo-3, four frames rising up and crackling with electricity. Sirens blare in the night, the lights going out in a perfect circle as ADAM advances, pausing onto to glance at the frames. Does it feel curiosity? Does it sense what is coming? He stops, He stares, at the sackcloth covered platform and the air whipping deep in the tunnels as power is delivered to the carriages.

And with a flash of light, something else appears on the edge of the Fortress City, taking the form of a massive hermit crab shell.

"Blue Pattern Detected!" Maya shouts, "Angel has appeared at the edge of the Tokyo-3 perimeter defense!"

Misato glares at the young operator, swearing under her breath.

"Shit," she growls, "New orders! Get that Angel down, now! If it makes contact with ADAM, we're screwed!"

The three horned shell opens the painted lidless eye, four clawed feet bursting out of holes as a head which is nothing more than a jaw with an eye at the center peaking out. Its eye goes alight as it recognizes its progenitor, and rising into the air it begins to streak towards Him.

It is the Angel of Suggestion, the Angel of Temptation. Fresh artillery fire washes over a rippling hexagonal field, and the Angel rises into the air, a pulse of light from the eye on its winding snake tail lancing into the mountain and setting the guns aflame.

Nothing must stop its blessed quest. Nothing must delay the completion of its goal and the calling of its empty soul.

ADAM turns and regards the Angel. **Iblis,** He thinks. Lazily, He raises his arm, opening His glowing palm towards the Angel as it rushes towards Complementation.

There is a flash of light and a crack of thunder; and where Iblis was is now a dispersing cloud of LCL which flows into ADAM's hand. Turning back towards its goal, ADAM resumes His advance.

"Blue Pattern…second Blue Pattern's gone," Maya says, mouth hanging open as the rest of the command staff turn back to the screen, "Did… did the other Angel just *vaporize?"*

The doors to Dogma open. Asuka runs in, taking up position next to Yui. Dr. Ikari smiles warmly and squeezes the girl's shoulder, turning to Misato and nodding.

"It's more hostile than we thought," she says, "It's angry and it's not f__ing around. Take it down. Evas launch!"

*

*

Four rails electrify, and four carriages speed to the surface. Restraints disengage, and the three Evangelions take their first tentative steps forward. Their eyes blaze yellow, green, and red, Jet Alone Prime hefting up its hammer. In the distance, ADAM turns to them, advancing inch by inch, inevitable and alien.

Shinji grips his controls, grimacing. This is it, he thinks, this is what it's all been leading to.

"Unit 01, ready," he calls out.

"Unit 02, ready."

"Jet Alone Prime, ready!"

No response from Unit 00. He narrows his eyes, mentally clicking the command to raise the orange Eva but finding only static and…what is that sound, he asks himself. Is that…crying?

"Rei?" he asks, "Rei, respond."

Cursing himself, he urges Unit 01 forward. The plan is simple, he tells himself. Neutralize the Angel's AT Field, which is crystallizing Tokyo-3 around it like some sort of ice valley. Punch a hole in it with the charging weapon, then deliver the payload which is on its way up. That will, according to Mom, destroy the Angel.

Two more sets of plates rise. On them are two Eva-scaled treadmills. Every non-bridge crew staff member of NERV is, under his father's direction now getting on exercise bikes to deliver the power necessary,

with the Evas providing the final push. It is possible the most insane plan he's ever heard of, but this thing just vaporized an Angel.

"Begin the operation," Misato says.

He nods. Unit 01 takes its steps forward. His mind links tentatively to the Eva, ready to spread out his AT Field.

Which is when the plug goes dark.

*

*

Unit 01 is first, falling to one knee as its eye go dim. Unit 02 follows, then Unit 00, and all three Evangelions go silent. In Central Dogma, the entire Command Staff of NERV watches in dim, mute horror as the plan falls apart over the space of five seconds.

"Oh no," Yui whispers, face turning pale.

"Doctor Ikari?" Asuka asks, "W-what just happened?"

"Eva, born from ADAM," Yui whispers, "It can't raise its hand against its origin. Eva cannot attack ADAM. But why did Unit 01 shut down…"

"Change of plans," Misato growls, "Mana! Kick its ass!"

*

*

Back vents on Jet Alone Prime open up, glowing white as thrust builds up. The central eye glows in tune with the white circle at the center of its chest, missile batteries opening up in the shoulders, arms, chest, and legs. In the cockpit command seat, Mana grins.

"Yes, *ma'am."*

A swarm of hundreds of mini missile fire out as Jet Alone's thrusters activate, propelling the 250' tall mecha at subsonic speed as the missile break the sound barrier, carrying a bow wave of shattered glass as the kinetic projectiles impacts and smash against the white wave of the AT Field.

35,000 tons of giant robot traveling at 150 miles per hour slams into the AT field of a primordial God. The field cracks, spiderwebbing as Jet Alone forces its way in by sheer kinetic energy. The left hand goes in first, the metal turning foggy, frosting over as the very presence of ADAM sucks the heat energy out of it. Ice crystals form in the Link Goo as Mana grits her teeth, shouting, screaming as she drives her mecha fully into the presence of the giant of light.

ADAM affords her a glance. The entire left arm shreds from unseen force, the feedback shooting through Mana's nervous system and making her scream. Sparks fly over the surface of Jet Alone's armor, individual plates freezing and shatters as ADAM's two black orbs spark. The screams of the pilot fill Central Dogma as every blast, every inch of armor lost reacts to her nervous system as if she is being flayed alive.

Slowly, lazily, ADAM reaches up and levels His hand at Jet Alone's chest. There is a flash of light and a crack of thunder. And Jet Alone is sent flying across Tokyo-3, coming to a dead stop halfway across the city, head first in an apartment complex. The hammer is released in mid flight, spinning through the air before slamming down near Unit 01.

ADAM continues His advance. First, shall be its pale shadows.

Then, these scurrying brown and pink monkeys will burn and feel the torment it has for seventeen years.

Finally, its opposite shall die, and all with it on these cursed little sphere.

*

*

"We've lost contact with the pilot of Jet Alone," Kaji yells.

"No response from circuits on any of the Evangelions! It's like they're ignoring the signals!" Maya shouts.

There is a crystal valley surrounding ADAM. He's just passed the park he went to on one of his days off, where he walked the path and fed some birds, and every plant under His shadow is now dead, along with anything that lived there. He hears Rei crying over the intercom, saying she musn't run away. He hears Uri yelling in frustration, and

Mana is still screaming in agony.

And ADAM is still walking towards them. Taking His time.

"This can't end like this," Shinji whispers.

eva cannot strike its father

The voice again. He asked Dr. Akagi about it. She said Unit 01 had some sort of maintenance AI in it which took care of the everyday things he didn't have to. That's why they played music for it and referred to Unit 01 as a person, not a tool.

he is the origin of eva origin of life

"And you're just going to lie down and die," he growls, "Is that it?"

He looks up, looks around the Entry Plug.

"You're afraid," he shouts, "You're afraid of him! Well…well I am to! But I got this cockpit because if I just stand here *cowering,* everyone is going to die!"

Silence, maybe a muted whisper behind his ears is all the reaction. He stands up in the seat. Hands balled into fists, teeth grinding, he stares ahead at the creature approaching and pads his fist.

"I know you're real," he shouts, "I know you're not some figment of my imagination! You saved me against the fourth angel and you came to help me with the sixth! You saved my life when the Seventh Angel almost killed me, so now you're going to *listen to me!* If that *thing* reaches the base, it's over. Everyone dies. You, me, my parents, every member of NERV…everyone I'm here to protect. Then it doesn't matter if the rest of the human race dies because we've *lost* everything we're fighting for. So I'm giving you a choice.

"Either you *get up* and help me, or I *get out* of this entry plug and try to drag that bastard down with my own two hands!"

if you face him, you will die

"If you do nothing, I die. Either way, I'm screwed. I'd like to go out knowing they're safe."

knowing she is safe

He grins, nodding.

"That obvious?"

yes

He sits back down in the chair, snapping on the restraints. The voice behind his ears is warm now, a small chuckle in it. The intelligence of Unit 01 reaches out, wrapping around his mind, feeling like crackling static behind his ears.

will you open your mind to me

He nods. His hands grip the butterfly controls and he takes a deep breath, forcing the LCL deep into his lungs.

"Will you help me?"

A small pause followed by a deep breath from something that doesn't breathe. There is a moment where the future hangs. A moment where everything is decided. A moment where the single word will branch off time itself into two paths of desolation or salvation. And a small smile creeps across Shinji's face as the moment is decided and a single word echoes through the Entry Plug.

YES.

The circles on the back of his hands glow blue in tune with the circle on his plug suit's chest. Opening his eyes, the irises flash once and glow blue. The entry plug lights up as the LCL ripples with the beat of the Core deep below.

"Third Child recognized," the digital voice announces, *"Synchronization holding at 270%. Level 7 functionality unlocked. Unit-01-"*

*

*

"-is RE-ACTIVATING," Maya announces.

On the main screen, they watch. Unit 01's eyes flash white, the purple titan rising from its crouch. It stands up straight and tall, fingers curling into fists as a blast of steam escapes its armored nostrils.

"That's not possible," Ritsuko whispers.

"What's Level 7?" Asuka asks.

"Realization," Yui explains, pushing her glasses up her nose, "Eva is surpassing its limits. It has realized it is not bound to ADAM and has made its choice. Now it begins to *evolve."*

*

*

The green strips along the arms glow, casting light upon the city. White light begins to glow underneath the plates of armor. The light builds as the first steps are taken, the massive purple feet slamming into the pavement as it begins its advance. Pausing momentarily, it considers its options. It cannot face ADAM alone.

It needs a weapon.

Extending a hand, the pilot gives his approval.

The Hammer rises from the street, lazily hanging before flying into Unit 01's hand. Resting the head on the shoulder, Unit 01 glares at the First Angel. The First Angel stares back and continues advancing.

In the cockpit, Shinji grins. He feels the Eva, now, and the Eva feels him. He is almost one with it, and clenches his left fist as the Eva does so in time.

"Ready?" he yells.

An affirmative thought and blast of steam out of the titan's nose.

Heavy footsteps slam into the pavement, the faint outline of eight yellow clawed wings trailing behind Unit 01 as it begins advancing. Running down the street, hammer at ready, pilot and chariot charge.

"This is Unit-01," Shinji shouts, "We are engaging the Angel!"

Chapter 17: Fall

Red garbed fists slam against the butterfly controls and a Germanic swear echoes in the cold metal tube. Glaring at the metal walls, blue red eyes narrowing, he slams his fists into the controls and swears again. This is getting him nowhere.

"Damn it," Uri growls, "Work, damn it! We don't have time for you to be a temperamental *arschloch!"*

Pitches his head forward and growls, only hearing that the battle has begun. Once again, he's going to get shown up. Once again, he will fail. From the day he first opened his eyes he has trained for this, but every Angel he has come up short against.

"Damn it," he growls, clenching his eyes shut, "Why don't you work?!"

*

*

The last step gives way to a leap. Unit 01 flies through the air, both hands gripping the handle before bringing it down in a single, sweeping strike…and hitting the field. It becomes visible, a solid sphere of rolling white. Purple feet slam down and the Evangelion flips off, landing in a crouch on the edge of the sphere as buildings, trees, the cement itself turns cold and brittle.

The arm does not move, but ADAM's hand is raised. There is a crack of thunder and a flash of light, and the blast stops upon Unit 01's AT Field as the armor cracks and fissures of light inch up the arm.

In the cockpit, heavy breathing and his eyes are glowing. He can feel the pain inching up, feel the bruising. It doesn't matter. The Core of Eva is singing in his ears, and he urges it forward once more.

Eyes like coals, He levels his hand and sends out His barrier. The air is thick and almost solid as Unit 01 advances, armor shredding, eyes glowing and the armor around its mouth beginning to contort and stretch. It will not yield. It will not falter. The armor around its chest bulges out and it pushes its arms forward, the air turning purple as the ground shudders. Anything not nailed down, from cars to benches to trailers rise into the air and fly towards ADAM.

And the field flashes and bends back, and for a moment, ADAM regards Unit 01. If one could see past the radiant aura and see the face, one would see an expression of pure surprise followed by terrible Anger.

And the Giant of Light continues its advance. Hands at its side open, crackling with light along its fingers, the First Angel determines to teach this upstart shadow a *lesson.*

-

-

Chapter 17: Fall

-

-

"Unit 01 is engaging the Angel," Maya calls out, "Its deployed its AT Field! Angel's advance has slowed!"

"I don't believe this," Ritsuko whispers, staring at the screen, "Shinji's managed to *slow down* ADAM?"

A small, wicked grin passes Misato's face as she slaps her friend on her shoulder.

"Better believe it, Ritz," she says, "Status on the other Evas!"

"Unit 00 and 02 non-responsive," Makato says, turning his chair to her, "I'm getting gibberish from 00's Plug. Both Evas are still rejecting orders."

"All commands rejected from Entry Plugs," Kyoko shouts, "Only getting audio signal!"

A muted swear comes from Misato's lips, followed by a louder one.

"F__! Then who's going to fire on it?!"

"The cannon's rigged for a manual activation," Ritsuko says, "We can get someone up there and have it fired that way."

Misato turns on her, a grin crossing her features before she slaps her on both arms.

"Right!"

Turning from her, she looks over to Yui, who snaps out of her staring on the screen to stare at Katsuragi.

"Doctor Ikari," she shouts, "Take command! I'll take care of the cannon!"

"What?" Yui asks, "Katsuragi! Don't do anything stupid!"

Which falls on deaf ears, as Misato has already run out, skidding to a stop in the elevator as it speeds up to the surface. Swearing, Ritsuko turns back to the screen. They had to anticipate this sooner or later with Him appearing. What they didn't anticipate is another member of the bridge crew abandoning their post.

*

*

The first blast shatters the orange barrier. The second blast shreds Unit 01's armor at the shoulder and makes Shinji scream in pain. His synch ratio is too high. He can feel everything that is done to his chariot, all the way to the eva's own voice screaming in his ears. Biting back bile, gripping the controls, he continues onward.

Unit 01 runs, runs into the barrier, breaking through it as ADAM brings up His hand. Unit 01's hand burns, smoking at the metal joints, the material underneath boiling as Shinji's eyes lock with the eyes of the First Angel.

For a moment, he stares into the Face of God.

Then, he smashes it with a 15,000 ton hammer.

The head of the hammer dents, collapsing inward, but there is a reaction. ADAM takes a single step back. Another swing sheers the head off and makes ADAM's head turn. Everything around Unit 01 save for the Eva itself is crystal and ice, the very heat being drawn into the primordial god.

But ADAM does not yield.

"Let's see how you like this," Shinji says with a grin, "Access Magoroku!"

The air around Unit 01's right arm distorts. The hilt appears first, peaking out through the rip in space, the air splitting as Unit 01's hand grips the hilt. The rip expands, swirling into a portal of light and nothingness, the sound of sliding metal, like a sword unsheathing filling the air as the segmented blade almost as long as the Eva is tall revealed.

The engine within the blue hilt hums as it comes to life. The cracks in the air become brighter and more pronounced, the blade glowing orange as Unit 01 brings the sword over its head. With a yell, Shinji brings it down. The air splits, the AT-Field blade coming to life as the single most powerful weapon in his arsenal comes down on the First Angel.

Who catches it in His hand.

The Progressive Blade shatters and Shinji's eyes go wide as ADAM directs His gaze upon him. There is a flash of light and a crack of thunder, and Unit 01 goes flying backwards.

It lands at the feet of the other two Evas, armor shredded. Shinji breathes in sharply before coughing up blood.

"That was stupid," he groans, "Eva?"

He grits his teeth, gripping the controls. Unit 01's eyes glow as it rises, coming to a stand over long, painful moments. For a moment, he considers deploying the Progressive Knife, but quickly comes to a realization that won't do much. Heavy footsteps echo as Unit 01 begins its advance-

Before it slows to a crawl.

i am scared

"I'm here," he says, "Don't be. He won't harm you while I'm alive, got it? If he wants to get to you, he gets through me!"

ADAM levels His gaze upon Unit 01 and extends His hand. The air comes alight and warps, and-

*

*

"The Angel's modified its AT Field," Maya calls out, "It's creating some sort of distortion effect! Unit 01's movement has slowed to minimal speeds!"

The intercom crackles. Pieter's face appears on a screen to the right of the central monitor.

"Dr. Ikari, preparations are done!"

Narrowing her eyes, adjusting her glasses, Kyoko turns from her station in Dogma.

"What preparations?" she asks.

"Our weapon against ADAM," Yui responds with a smile, "We recovered the S2 organ from Shamsiel. We weaponized it and put it into a warhead, and now we're going to use it against ADAM."

*

*

"Can't sleep, ADAM will eat me. Can't sleep, ADAM will eat me. Musn't run away. Musn't run away. Musn't run away."

Red eyes open in the darkened entry plug. The song of the First Angel echoes through her ears, shutting down all rational thought. Tapping her fingers on her arms, staring out and past the steel at the form of ADAM, she gazes and waits.

"…Rei? Rei, can you hear me?"

"Hai."

"Rei, it's Asuka. A-are you alright? W-we can't get any visual signals."

"All your base are belong to ADAM."

"…what? R-Rei, you're not making any sense."

"Is it can be hugs tiem now plees?"

*

*

The waves of force buffet Unit 01 as it advances, slowly and painfully against the waves of ADAM's presence. Every step is painful. Every inch feels like moving through knives and brick. Every step makes a renewed gush of yellow LCL splash onto the street, and every step makes Shinji grunt in pain.

He will not fail. He will not fall.

The pain focuses him. It is a good pain. A waking pain. In his ears, he hears Eva and his thoughts are with hers. Every inch will be fought for and this victory will be taken step by step.

"I'm coming for you," he growls.

*

*

"Rei," Asuka says, "Rei, l-listen to me. I n-need to walk you through the manual activation for Unit 00."

"Lalalalala not lisn!"

Shrugging, turning back to Yui with a confused expression on her face. Sighing, she turns back to the console, clicking the intercom once again. On the main screen, the image of what should be the Entry Plug is blacked out, leaving only the words SOUND ONLY.

"Rei," Asuka says, "R-Rei, please listen. It's m-me. Y-you can trust me, can't you?"

"Ur password is FAIL! Entry are denied!"

A pause as Asuka turns back to Yui. The two share a confused look, followed by the channel crackling again.

"Invisible man r pissed!"

"What is she doing," Yui asks, "This isn't any code. Has Rei snapped?"

At his station, Shigeru Aoba peaks his head up and snaps his fingers.

"Wait!" he yells, "Doctor Ikari! Rei's speaking in LOLcats!"

*

*

Slamming the release for the restraints, Uri finally stands up, staring into the Entry Plug and gritting his teeth.

"You're a coward!" he shouts, "And you can hear me, can't you!? Why won't you get up and do your job?"

No response. He didn't expect one, either. Unit 02 doesn't respond to him like Unit 01 does for Ikari, after all. It wouldn't. There's something wrong with the purple giant, but yet…

"Is because of him?" he asks, "Because of ADAM? Because you're made from a cell culture from that monster?"

More silence, and he balls his fists. There's something in the pit of stomach, something uncomfortable as he growls and begins to wonder if there's anything to even respond to.

"So that's it?" he asks, "You're afraid? You're the single most advanced fighting machine on the planet and you're *afraid?* Of what? What he'll do to you?"

Clicks his tongue, shrugs, folds his arms and stares at the metal bulkhead.

"Maybe you're afraid of him being disappointed in you. Maybe you're afraid you won't be good enough for him! Is that it?!"

A small pulse in the floor, something stirring deep below.

"Fine, then!" he shouts, "Stay down! Cower! Are you just going to do what he tells you for the *rest of your life?!"*

The walls turn transparent, light returning to the Entry Plug as the sleeping beast lurches.

"Synchronization holding at 68%. Unit 02 has activated."

Grinning, Uri slides back into the seat, snapping on the restraints and gripping the butterfly controls.

"Well, that was easy," he says, clicking the mental switch for the intercom, "Central Dogma, this is Unit 02. Taking position on the treadmill!"

*

*

The pressure lessens. The knives and bricks become thick mud as Unit 01 advances. It stands upright now, and a grin splits Shinji's face. The air around Unit 01's hand shifts, becoming a large short blade, summoned from the Dirac Armory.

"I'm coming for you."

*

*

"Rei," Asuka says, leaning on the console, teeth grit as her mother urges Uri on, "Rei, please listen to me. I know you're scared. I-I know that the Angel terrified you. He terrifies all of us, alright?"

A crackle comes over the intercom.

"No can brain today. Want cheezeburger."

Asuka sighs. Smacking her hand on the console, she grabs the corded walkie talkie and brings it up to her face.

"Listen to me," she growls, "You're terrified. Well, s-so's everyone else! And do you know what? I'm pretty sure Shinji's f__ing terrified of that to, but he's still charging that thing and he'll be killed if we don't help him!"

Silence over the communicator. Leaning against the console, a small, knowing grin on her face, Asuka stares at the screen.

"And Rei," she says, "Do you know what terrifies every l-living thing in Tokyo-3 more than any Angel? And what would terrify that Angel if i-it came out right now?"

Silence on the other line as she considers the thought. She can almost feel her smiling in the plug.

"Terrifying Rei is terrifying?"

"Ya," Asuka says, "Rly."

"Unit 00 is re-activating!" Maya shouts.

On the screen, the cycloptean Evangelion rises, taking its place on the treadmill next to Unit 02 as the meters on either side of the central screen fill towards the red line.

"Cannon charge at 70%," Shigeru shouts, "Both Evas have extended their AT Fields!"

*

*

The mud has become water. The crawling becoming walking becoming a run. Unit 01's eyes flash and the armor around the mouth loosens, bonds breaking as the great purple titan gives off a knowing growl. Vibromotors in the Progressive Dagger come to life as he clears the last hundreds of feet, driving the blade into ADAM's shoulder.

A whine fills the air as the treadmills transmit power over the lines. Deep within the bowels of NERV, eight thousand bikes hooked up to turbines transmit electricity to the charging weapon's core.

And Shinji, body hurting and mind reeling, knows he is not alone. The Angel is angry, the Angel has been wounded. The Angel is a beast powered by rage and more powerful than anything else that walks the Earth. But the Angel is alone, and he has the entire human race behind him this day. As he stares into the black pits of its eyes and sees the excuse it has for a soul, he reacts quicker than by any rights he should. The hand comes up, but Unit 01 grabs it, grappling with the physical god before it.

For the first time in its endless existence, ADAM is held fast.

"We're not going to yield," Shinji yells, "We're not going to fall! Not today! Not ever! You hear me?!"

*

*

"Power capacitors at 85% and climbing," Maya shouts, "Unit 01 is holding the Angel in place!"

Yui nods, stepping to the center of Dogma and watching both her son

and masterpiece wrestle with a creature that nearly destroyed the human race. Maternal pride brews within her as they do the impossible, just as they have done every other time they've been out there.

But this.

This will go down in legend, the day Man wrestled God.

Assuming they survive.

"Package is on its way to the surface," Akagi shouts, "All we need is the cannon!"

*

*

The wind whips around her as she clears the last shaft, climbing onto the surface next to the burlap covered platform. Running over, Misato quickly pulls aside the brown cloth, exposing the dials and levers. Turning dials as she was shown during the first time they fired this thing, generators inside of it hum to life, the streets of Tokyo-3 turning dark and gray as the entire power output of the city is added to the capacitor of this great and massive weapon.

"Misato," Ritsuko says via the transmitor in her ear, *"Thirty seconds to full charge. If we let the capacitor go over, there's a chance it could blow!"*

"That's all I need, Ritz."

Flipping switches, display LCDs light up with graph readings. Power lines crackle and specialized sub stations spin to life to deliver the necessary charge to the biggest gun they have. Turning, watching the battle, she flips one of the three final switches.

And ADAM looks straight at her. She freezes, eyes locking with the black orbs of the creature that has haunted her nightmares for seventeen years. Events flash before her eyes. The giant of light. Her father's face the moment before he vaporized. The years of mute silence and the horror of a world half destroyed.

I REMEMBER YOU.

The voice echoes between her ears. Her teeth grind and she glares

back at the First Angel.

"Good," she says, "Because I sure remember you, to."

Second switch. Arcs of electricity dance over the burlap, setting spots on fire.

WHAT ARE YOU?

The ultimate life form. The ultimate destination of all life asks that question of her. Grinning, hand hovering on the third switch, she stares down her greatest nightmare as the cloth begins to burn away.

"My name is Misato Katsuragi," she says, "Lieutenant Colonel of NERV. Daughter of Shiro Katsuragi, the stupid son of a bitch who woke you up. I am the daughter of a murdered man and the only human being to look on you with their own eyes and live to tell about it.

"I am the *right hand of retribution* and the last human being you will *ever* see, you glow in the dark mother f__er. Now smile asshole. Because this,"

Final switch slips. The burlap burns away to reveal the bulk and metal of the Positron Cannon.

"Is my seventeen years of f__ing *payback!"*

Her fist slams against the big red button. Transformers come to life, arching lightning over the course of the barrel as the exit point glows, light gathering in it as a single round is accelerated to plasma with a pocket of antimatter suspended in it. The night sky turns to day where Misato stands, and as the rigging begins to melt under the heat, she is happy to know that she will die fulfilled.

"Katsuragi, DOWN!"

Kaji tackles her, throwing down a sphere which explodes into a transparent dome around them both. Pinned to the ground by him, she looks up at his stubble covered face as he smirks.

"JSSDF shield grenade," he says, "I have the best toys."

*

*

The beam of blue light lances out, covering the distance from the barrel to ADAM in the space of a fraction of a second. The entire energy output of NERV, the Evas, and Tokyo-3 slams into the chest of the First Angel, the chewy center of positrons blasting through His chest and out the other side.

The low, mournful moan escapes the creature as it glows. Glass shatters around it, its black eyes filling with white light. The sun rises in Tokyo-3 from within, the sky turning from black to blue as ADAM glows, crackling white light wrapping around Him in bands bright enough to make His form unbearable to the naked eye.

Which is when an orange field wraps around Him, pulling Him down to the street as Unit 01 holds Him fast.

Holding it by the wrists, Unit 01's armor smokes and boils. The light reflects off of its sheen, the light almost blinding in the Entry Plug as Shinji concentrates, his eyes a solid blue glow as the AT Field wraps around the First Angel.

"Yield!" he shouts, "Yield you omnipotent f__ing bastard! *YIELD!"*

"Angel is building up energy! It's starting to go critical!"

"Mom!" Shinji shouts, "Whatever you're going to do, now would be a good time!"

The glow diminishes slightly. Hands forward, Unit 02's eyes glow, its own AT Field wrapping around the First Angel and pushing down the reaction. A third field wraps around it, cocooning ADAM as Unit 00 takes its position as the final point of the triangle. Rei is humming a tune, now, the Angel's song. For some reason, it sounds sad, lonely.

"I thought the Eva's couldn't attack ADAM," Shinji says, "Uri?"

"What can I say? Unit-02 may have a rebellious streak."

"Unit-00 doesn't care either way," Rei adds, *"An' I think if someone as soft as Shinji can kick him around, I get to join in. 'Kay?"*

Shinji releases, stepping back, a grin from ear to ear as Unit-01 extends its hands and presses with its field, as a platform rises above the Positron Cannon and exposes a red and white missile with a glowing red warhead.

"S2 missile is activated. Warhead is generating distortion field. Firing in

three…two…one!"

Rockets ignite and the missile fires off, streaking across Tokyo-3. It leaves trails of red and black light behind it, a smoke trail dragging through the air as it hits the space around ADAM. The hull begins to frost, the tail fins becoming heavy with ice as it loses speed before spinning off course.

*

*

"Missile has impacted off target," Makato yells.

"The Angel's generating a distortion field," Yui says, "Damn it! The warhead has to be hand delivered, then!"

Shinji's face clicks on the screen, his eyes glowing an unearthly blue as he switches his gaze back and forth from the Angel to them.

"Wait, so why can't we just blow the Angel up?"

"Shinji, when ADAM dies he releases all his excess mass," Yui says, "The last time he did that, he vaporized Antarctica. The S2 warhead will create an entry way into a Dirac Sea for ADAM's total mass and prevent this sort of thing from happening again, but only if it is placed inside ADAM."

"A Dirac Sea? About how bad is one of those things?"

"The sea itself is harmless," Yui explains, "It's a theoretical vacuum model. Its entryway, however, behaves something like a limited lifespan wormhole."

"So…that's not something to leave lying around the city, then."

A pause on his end as a grimace crosses his face.

"I'm closest to it. Roger."

*

*

Unit-01 retracts its arms and takes off in a run, towards the glowing missile embedded halfway inside a shopping center. The missile is small, about the size of Unit 01's forearm and easy to wrap the purple mecha's hand around. The warhead, however, has already begun glowing. It is warping the air around it, lines of rippling white surrounding the nosecone as the frosted metal peels off, sucking the air and the pieces of the clothing department it landing in against the missile itself.

"I've retrieved the missile! Preparing to deliver!"

Unit-01 runs. Every step carries new weight, the supermassive entryway of the warhead now glowing, growing, the metal plates surrounding the warhead caving in before the tip of the nosecone collapses inward and disappears. The seams of the red metal part and bend inward as Unit-01 sprints, the tail fins curling inward.

"Shinji, hurry," his mother yells, *"If the S2 engine goes critical it caaaaaaaaaa"*

The light distorts around the warhead. As it approaches ADAM, the light begins bleeding off of Him, sucked down into the distorting sphere of the payload. Each step breaks pavement under Unit 01's foot, each motion causing the city to bend around him.

ADAM glows. Two blasts fly out, breaking the AT Field prison and throwing Unit 00 and 02 off their feet, tossed back into the city, and the First Angel advances.

He reaches out and wraps a glowing hand around Unit 01's neck, Shinji choking as he feels the burning fingers. Red marks appear on his flesh as he gags against the pressure. Unit-01 screams in his ear at the pain, at the burning, at the terror, *and HE's inside my mind* and hears the voice.

YOU ARE A SHADOW.

The black pools stare at him, boring deep.

YOU ARE A PALE IMITATION.

Light crackles along His fingers, black marks appearing on Shinji's neck.

I AM NO LONGER TAKING YOUR MEASURE.

White begins to pool in the black circles of ADAM's eyes, a pillar of white light forming around Him.

AND I AM DONE PLAYING.

"Yeah."

Shinji grins, tensing his right arm.

"So am I."

And Unit-01 shoves the missile into the hole the Positron Cannon blasted through ADAM's chest. The pillar of light bends and folds in on itself. The ever present glow of the First Angel recedes and pours down the cosmic sink hole forming in the center of His chest. Both of Unit-01's hands grip the glowing hand around its throat and pulls as the Angel begins to fold inward, the air and light around it swirling as the entrance to the Dirac Sea localizes around it.

They are screaming in his ear to run. Each one of ADAM's fingers break as Unit-01 digs its claws into them, each one releasing its hold on pain. The pull can be felt in the LCL rippling forward. The entire cockpit lists as, with a final roar Unit-01 pulls the hand away, backing away as the light around it flows towards ADAM's chest-

*

*

From high above, the area near the center of Tokyo-3 flashes. Like a cosmic sinkhole light, sound, and air flows downwards into a spot not half a block in diameter, consuming the cosmic horror which walked like a man. A bolt of light spits out, lancing the moon as every person who knows what they are looking at shields their eyes.

There is a sound, a silent sound released from the outraged roars of the First Angel. Around the world, every animal without ears hears it, and ten percent of them keel over. On the Moon, the sands dance and the footprints of nearly fifty years ago vanish as the sphere shakes in ADAM's rage.

In the depths of Terminal Dogma, Lilith, the progenitor of Mankind, sheds yellow tears of LCL upon hearing the cry of its opposite. One of the many legs growing from its torso appears to almost be luminous, as if it is creating one life in honor of its eternal rival.

And in Central Dogma, they watch as the light clears and the First Angel is cast out of the physical universe into the void and vacuum between. Sensors come back on from the momentary static and flash as the wormhole slams shut, and all they see where the Angel once was is the empty street and bent buildings.

"Where is Unit-01?" Yui asks.

Silence. The indicator visuals next to the screen for the Third Child and his Eva are blank.

"Shinji," Yui calls out, "Shinji, respond please."

Silence.

"Shinji," Yui shouts, "Respond! *Now!"*

The silence hangs over Dogma as a palpable thing. Dr. Ikari's fists curl as her face twists, eyes going wide as the gravity of the situation begins to sink in.

"No…signal," Maya says, "Dr. Ikari, Unit-01 is not responding."

Hand clenching and unclenching, Yui runs her hand through her hair, her breath coming in short, shaky spurts as the comm. channel dedicated towards the purple mecha transmits only static.

"Doctor Ikari."

Yui turns to Asuka, and finds something she had not expected. Not panic, not disbelief, not a girl who she would expect to break down right now. Instead, she finds a face with a small, nervous smile and eyes holding something she can't place.

"Asuka?" Yui asks, "What is it?"

"I," Asuka says, pauses, and considers her words carefully, trying to find the single phrase she knows that can sum up exactly what the situation entails. They come to mind, the same words she said to Katsuragi some days ago.

"I can fix this."

Chapter 18: You Are Not Alone

The light clicks on, a spotlight hanging overhead. Blinking his eyes at the sudden illumination, Shinji Ikari turns in a circle, taking in the formless, featureless room that surrounds him. For a moment, he wonders how exactly he got here. He remembers the pulling, and ADAM being sucked into the vortex and…

Ah.

Okay, that's it. Whatever this Dirac Sea is, he's probably there.

That, or he's dead.

He hopes that's not the case. Other than the idea of dying a virgin, there's also the fact that if he died like he did, he's sure a lot of people will be unhappy. Sure, he went out in an epic battle against the greatest monster the world had ever seen, but at the same time he's sure that isn't a consolation to his parents.

He's pretty sure it isn't any consolation to Asuka.

"Is there anyone here?" he asks.

Silence answers him. Silence, followed by a soft, choking sound, a wet gurgling and misery that he identifies as sobbing.

"Hello?" he asks.

Nothing, then. Just an empty chair under the spotlight sitting before him. Sighing, legs tired, he slumps down in it and folds his hands in his lap.

"Great," he groans, "Now what? Am I in the Entry Plug? Can this get worse?"

"**For you? Perhaps.**"

The spotlight flickers, and there is another chair, and something or… someone in it. He can't make out the exact shape or the image but he knows that he's not alone in this room, and that something is staring at him.

"Okay…" Shinji says, and sighs, "Well, I guess I'm not alone here, am I? I guess I'm kind of lost."

"**Everyone is lost. Everyone is alone.**"

Shinji nods, staring at the floor. Sighing, he looks up, squinting at the chair to try to get an idea of what he's staring at.

"But…well, we're here. So I guess we're not alone. Right?"

"**Perhaps. Tell me, Shinji. What do you have to home for?**"

-

-

Chapter 18: You Are -Not- Alone

-

-

Eyes open with a start. Mana Kirishima tries to sit up on the hospital bed but finds her body not responding like she wants it to. Sighing, she feels her fingers flex and toes curl before looking to her side and spotting Kaji sitting in the chair at her bedside.

"What happened?" she asks.

"The Link Goo froze," he responds, "Katsuragi and I got you cut out and we thawed you. Sorry you missed the fight."

Her back responds as she wants it to, finally, and she props herself up on her elbows.

"Well, I guess we're all alive," she says with a groan, "So, we offed the First Angel, then?"

"You get some credit," Kaji says with a sigh, "Shinji whacked it in the face with Sigmar. Twice."

A chuckle.

"Sweet," she says, and lies back down, spreading her arms out, "So, what's with the glum look, Kaji? Something happen when I was out?"

He nods. Folding his hands In his lap, snorting out a held in breath, he waits for her to turn to him Reading his face like a book, she sits up, her smile disappearing.

"Who'd we lose?" she asks.

"We lost Ikari," he responds, "He, and Unit-01, went out with the Angel."

*

*

"Dirac theory," Asuka explains, sitting at Maya's console as she furiously types away at the keyboard, "We can send signals to and from the Dirac Armory, right?"

"Correct," Maya says, leaning over her shoulder, "When Shinji fought the Sixth Angel, Dr. Ikari had a computer connection to the armory. So we can sent a signal and connect to a receiver in there."

Asuka nods. A small grin passes over her face before steadying, lines of code writing themselves across the screen before the words 'Connection Confirmed' appear, showing a holographic ring of folders and weapons.

"In theory," Asuka says, "We can bounce a signal out of the Armory and reach Unit-01, right?"

Maya nods, folding her arms.

"So I can do this," Asuka says, "I can do this. I can contact Unit-01 and guide it home. Right?"

Maya nods, patting her shoulder.

"I'm going to check up on the Commander and Dr. Ikari," Maya says, "Okay?"

Asuka nods, turning back to the computer as Maya disappears through the doors of Central Dogma to the rest of the base itself. Tapping at the keys, she returns to her task. She can fix this. She can fix this.

She can fix this.

*

*

Twelve monoliths form in the darkness, whispering amongst themselves before the outrage sets in.

"ADAM has been lost!" 08 yells, "How could this be allowed to happen?! Why was NERV not given the Lance?!"

"The loss of ADAM is the loss of the path to Divinity," 04 adds, voice warbling, "What recourse is left for Human Instrumentality?"

The spotlight shines at the center. Adjusting his glasses, Gendo Ikari folds his arms and waits.

"What is the meaning of this," 06 demands, "Where is Doctor Ikari?"

"Doctor Ikari is busy," Gendo says, "As you are aware, the weapon used against ADAM also trapped Unit 01, and her son, in the Dirac Sea. She is currently planning a rescue attempt. However, I am here to both speak for her and to deliver her message."

Silence from the twelve monoliths.

"Speak it, then," 01 says.

"Progress has been made on finding an alternate path to Instrumentality," Gendo says, pushing his glasses up his nose, "Both based on the idea that ADAM is merely immobilized but not dead, and also on using Lilith alone. Doctor Ikari asks for your patience in these troubled times and will be with you in time. Now, any further questions?"

The monoliths go silent. Hands folded behind his back, the Supreme Commander of NERV waits, eyes wandering towards 06 more than the others.

"Additionally," he adds, "NERV will be making a public statement within the next hour. As the Committee does not wish vital information to be shared, we will not include the specifics of ADAM's discovery or our role in his detonation."

"What public statement, Ikari?" 01 demands.

"That the Angel destroyed by NERV was the same Angel that caused the Second Impact," Gendo says, turning to the façade of Kihl, "While we had never anticipated that ADAM could awaken or be set loose, it is sensible to use the potential public good will."

A pause from the monoliths.

"Continue," 06 states.

"NERV will be untouchable," Ikari states, "All our actions, from this point, will be justified to the public due to this victory. We have avenged half the human race and have shown that even a being which most cultures would mistake as a God cannot stand against the Evangelions."

Pushing his glasses up his nose, his face remains unreadable. The spotlight reflects off the amber lenses to the point where his eyes cannot even be seen.

"Of course," he says, "ADAM's release was an accident. We have the implicit trust that the Committee had taken every precaution and that the destruction of NERV-Bethany was an unfortunate and unanticipated event."

A pause followed by silence from the assembled monoliths.

"That will be all, Ikari," 01 says.

"Of course, Chairman," Gendo says, and turns to his heel as the monoliths vanish.

*

*

The slow ticking of the clock is the only sound she really registers. Not that she admits it to many people but Asuka has a photographic memory. She remembers everything, even the things she would rather forget. From her mother's scowling face when she told her she wanted to enter the Eva program to that prideful look Mother would have when looking at Uri.

Never at her.

That doesn't matter. For the first time, what Mother thinks doesn't matter. Right now, the only thing that matters is making it work.

The shifts rotate in Central Dogma, taking skeleton crew positions as the main screen shows the lifting of Jet Alone Prime off a shopping district by a squadron of VTOLs. Sub Commander Fuyutsuki comes

and goes, and an entire day passes as she taps out code and keeps sending out signals.

"That's the problem," she sighs, "The Dirac Sea's a universe, isn't it? Some big, empty, universe, and it's a matter of finding it. Isn't it?

"Maybe it's not that simple, but there is a way to narrow it down, isn't it? Haven't you checked your emails lately?"

Sighing, she takes out her PDA and clicks on her email server. A new email is there, from Shinji's pen pal. He must have given her the email address, and she doesn't mind, as from his description she must be friendly. The greeting is a simple one, talking about how she's happy to meet her and hopes they will be friends. It also has her IM in formation and she/he is already on her buddy list, which is admittedly small.

"Hn," she sighs, and turns back to the computer screen. No matter the angle, they can't find a receiver. There has to be a way to narrow it down, Asuka things.

She can't accept that he's gone, because if he's gone then

"Hey."

A cup of coffee is now on her console, and she looks up to Misato's smiling face.

"Hi," Asuka says.

"How're you doing," Misato asks, pulling up a chair, "Working hard?"

"Y-yes," Asuka sighs, "I-I'm trying to figure out how to c-contact Unit 01, b-but I c-can't figure out how to n-narrow the field."

Misato nods, squeezing her shoulder.

"There's some way," Misato says, "You'll find it. It's like around here, right? The Earth is huge, but I can talk with anyone if I have a phone number, right?"

"You mean like a cell phone," Asuka says.

"Yeah. Find the number and they can call you or you them. So you're trying to find Unit-01's cell phone number."

Asuka sighs, leaning on the console.

"And cell tower and everything else," Asuka sighs, "Except…except… except…"

She starts mumbling something to herself. Tapping her fingers, she takes out her PDA again and looks at it. Humming something to herself, she stares at the message, tapping her foot on the floor as Misato waves her hand in front of Asuka's face, a confused, concerned look on her face.

"Wait," Asuka says.

"Asuka?" Misato asks, "Asuka, you sort of zoned out there."

"I can fix this," Asuka says with her small smirk, her eyes alighting, "I can fix this. Dr. Ikari used the name because it sounds normal but it translates. It was like a Turing test, wasn't it? Have a recording and it eventually sounds real and someone on the other side can't tell the difference."

She turns to Misato, grabbing her arms as her smile becomes wider.

"When we were in Germany, Mother and Uri kept referring to Unit-02 as Zwei," she says, "Do you know why? Because-"

"Because Zwei is German for Two," Misato says, "Asuka, what are you getting at?"

"If you spoke Japanese your entire life and thought it in all the time, the name is a simple name," Asuka says, "The name of a girl. Shinji wouldn't have noticed and no one else would because it seems normal! After all, the name they use for it when we do press releases is just the number or Shogoki, right? So the other name's perfect! But it's right there in front of us and in plain sight!"

Turning back to Misato, Asuka brings up new numbers, laughing to herself.

"What are you getting at?" Misato asks, "Asuka, you're freaking me out."

"Dr. Ikari likes naming people after numbers," Asuka says with a grin, "Rei. Japanese for Zero. And do you know what the Japanese word is for 01?"

The grin becomes wider. Her fingers become a blur over the keyboard as she laughs.

"Ichi."

*

*

He reaches out to the shape. As he does so, he finds his fingers fading, dissolving into the light before he pulls them back with a gasp. The shape in the chair does not move, or at least in a way one would normally consider movement. It simply shifts and stares at him.

"I think I'm still in the Plug," he says, "This all seems too…symbollic, I guess? Like it should be something personal."

"**No one understands another. The closer we come, the closer we come to becoming one.**"

He stares at him/her for a moment. Awfully deep for a figment of my imagination, he thinks, before scratching his head and laughing.

"I guess so," he says, "Kind of like AT Fields, right? Like we have our own AT Fields we're projecting. But I think I can understand people if I listen. I know why Misato fights. I know some of Hikari's fears. I know Asuka's…"

"**Trauma,**"the shape says, "**You know her trauma because it was presented to you after you ignored it.**"

"I did," he says with a sigh, "I did. I tried to assume the best. I didn't know it was that bad. I kept trying to protect her, but I guess what I was doing was protecting myself."

He runs his hands through his hair, groaning.

"God…what is she doing back home? Does she even know I'm still alive?"

The shape shifts. It is almost human and staring at him with empty eyes. If he looks close enough, he could see something resembling him. Maybe human, maybe something else, but he can't say for sure.

Maybe he's just gone insane.

"**Why think of her? Why even think she is still alive? You've given her hope and now you died before her very eyes. How badly do you think that broke her?**"

Face sinking into his hands, Shinji tries to cover his ears but finds his fingers cannot reach them.

"**A day. Perhaps two. After your empty casket funeral she will most likely cut the arteries in her arms and bleed out. Your guardian, who bore her soul to you, will drink herself to a stupor. Your mother, grief stricken, will bury herself in her work.**"

The spotlight flickers. The light begins to fade as the lips hover next to his ear. The harsh, burning words and the bile carried upon them clouding his vision as the darkness overtakes him.

"**Maybe it would have been better if you were never born.**"

*

*

Dr. Sohryu was on a warpath. Not only did Unit-02's little breakdown during the last Angel attack act like a giant black mark against her – meaning Ikari's boy not only had to hog the glory but then went out in a heroic sacrifice- but now that girl is hold up in Central Dogma and making a *fool* out of herself because she wants to save the idiot.

This wouldn't be a problem if Asuka could just keep her damn legs closed.

She is going to go into Dogma herself and drag that girl out by her own damn hair if she has to. Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu is *sick and tired* of this.

Standing before the double door entrance to Dogma's central level, she flares her nostrils and clenches her hands into fists. She has a litany of observations ready on what she has been doing wrong and how she is embarrassing her. It's for the girl's own good, after all.

"Mother!"

Spinning, she raises an eyebrow as Uri walks down the hallway, waving to her.

"What is it, Uri?"

"Mother, if you have some time, I wanted to talk to you about some of Zwei's problems during the last battle," he says, "I have some suggestions, if you wanted to hear."

Kyoko stares at him, taps her foot, and with a sigh folds her arms and nods.

"Very well," she says, "I will see you in my office in five minutes."

Patting him on the shoulder, she walks back down the hallway towards the main lift. Uri watches her go before he rolls his eyes and groans, shoulders slumping.

"Thank you for not killing my mother, Ayanami."

The ventilation grate drops down next to him and Rei peaks her head out of the ceiling duct with a grin.

"Just so she doesn't make my bestest best friend angry," she responds, "'Cause if she touches Asuka, I touch her. 'Kay?"

He nods, and turns on his heel to stare at her.

"Why do I get the feeling," he says, "That if we fraternized, I wouldn't be the man in the relationship?"

She raises and eyebrow, stares at him for a moment, and shrugs.

"That's not true," she says, "You'd be the man."

She smiles, showing teeth, and for a moment he swears her eyes glowed.

"I'd be the Rei."

She ducks into the ventilation duct and is gone. Staring after her for a long, silent moment, Uri suppresses a shudder and begins walking towards the lift. The things he does for his sister…

*

*

Tapping her fingers, she alternates between that and gripping her hair

in her fists. Dogma is empty, the night shift having taken over. Dr. Ikari occasionally peaks in, but it is her. Only her. She's not useless. She's not useless. *She's not useless.*

"Hey."

She turns and groans, finding Mana leaning on her crutch.

"Hi," Asuka croaks.

"How long've you been here?" Mana asks.

Blinking, staring at the code on the screen, she rests her head in her hands.

"How long has Unit-01 been missing?"

"Three days," Mana says.

"Then I've been here three days," Asuka sobs, "I-I can't f-find him. I t-think I found Unit-01, I t-think it's…Ichi. I f-found Ichi."

Mana pulls over a chair, slumping into it.

"Step back," she says, "Ichi?"

"U-Unit 01 has an AI," Asuka explains, "It's named Ichi. S-she was a Turing test f-for Shinji, and s-she started contacting me. I found w-where the emails were coming from, and I t-think I found Unit-01 in the Dirac. I think, b-but there's no response."

Mana nods, squeezing Asuka's shoulder.

"What if he's not awake?" he asks.

She turns to Mana, mouth open. Closing it, shaking her head, she leans back in the chair.

"What do you mean?"

"He could be unconscious," Mana explains, "When I was in my coma, the thing that really brought me out of it was someone talking to me. You know? So, what if he's unconscious? Or what if he's in a coma? He's not gonna hear pings and that sort of thing. He will hear your voice."

*

*

At the time she hit her 90th hour without sleep, she figured it all out. She altered the main transceiver on their apartment building using duct tape, a pair of metal chopsticks, and the contents of a cheap cathode tube television.

It was easy to confirm it. At Maya's console in Dogma, at the late hours of the early morn, sometime around four in the morning. She's alone here, on four days without sleep, and she just bounced voice signals off the Triple Heavy Maser.

"Okay, we have confirmation that we can send voice into the Dirac as radio.

"Buuuuuut what if we can't find him?

"That's simple. We bounce the signals off of the armory with Ichi's IP address, right? And when the signal locks on, or if it does, we can simply talk to him then!"

She laughs. The laugh starts slow, and then turns into a long, loud cackle…and stops.

"So, what do I say?"

Digging her nails into her palms, she stares at the screen. Moments of transition and moments of revelation. That is all life is made up of, or at least the parts of life that make us live. She has to decide which this is, right now. Whether she can sit here and panic as she would under most circumstances. Whether she can sit here and curl up and wait for things to happen.

"But what do I say," she moans, "What do I say to him?"

There is silence, for a change. What does she want? It's not what she should say, it is what he would hear. It is what he should hear from her.

Shakily taking the walkie from its perch, she clicks it. Holding it in front of her lips for a moment, she closes her eyes.

"Central Dogma to Unit-01," she says, "This is NERV. Please respond. Central Dogma calling Unit-01, please…"

She shakes her head. No, no. That's not how it should sound. What if he is in a coma, after all? What if he isn't aware of the world around him? Would he really want something so mechanical?

"Shinji, it's Asuka," she says, "Please respond. I-I…don't know if you're hearing this, b-but I h-hope you are."

God, she thinks, pressing the walkie against her forehead, That was even worse. That sounded fake more than anything, didn't it?

"I-I'm sorry," she stammers, "I'm sorry. It…w-we're hoping you're…no, I'm hoping your out there. I d-don't know if you can hear me, but…I really hope you can. I told Dr. Ikari I'd f-fix this, but I d-don't know if it works. So m-maybe I'm talking to n-nothing, and maybe you're d-dead but I don't want to think that's t-true. So, please…tell me you're alive out there, b-because I have a few things to say."

*

*

"**No one ever knows another,**" it says, "**No one can ever be close. It is all just an illusion, Shinji. It is so easy to fade away…to accept reality as it truly, truly is.**"

He can't disagree. It's right. Reality as it is will just have him piloting a giant robot again and fighting monsters. What really is waiting for him back home? His entire body feels like it's on fire because of what he did against the Angel. He's already had one heart attack because of the Seventh Angel. Ribs snapped against the Sixth, and he's not the only one this has happened to.

"**Your parents use you. Your guardian sees you as an instrument of vengeance. Who is there to live for? The girl? The broken girl? The maniac you have to partner with on the field of battle, now that you know what she is? Or that horrible woman's cipher? Do you really think you are invaluable to them?**"

He looks up and sees something like his own face. After all, mankind sees itself in God.

"**You know I'm right.**"

Then, there is a sound. Choked, horrible, wet sounds much like sobbing. Turning from the twisted mirror, he sees another spotlight

come on in the distance. He wants to see it, to see who else is here, but the weight on him is so heavy.

"**You can't save them.**"

The sound is miserable and lonely.

"**You fail at it. You can't even die right.**"

It sounds, familiar, to. Like those night when his parents first sent him away, when he'd cry in his bed because he thought it was his fault.

"**Just fade away. Just do what you always wanted.**"

Is sounds like Asuka when she broke down after Sahaquiel.

"**Just run away.**"

The weight is so heavy on him in the chair. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that his legs feel like shattering as he leans forward. It doesn't matter how his shoulders feel like they will crack as he begins to rise. The other voice is silent, his mirror is just watching.

And just to be certain of it, as he stands, he then turns and kicks the chair away.

The weight lessens with every step. He is tired and he is hurting, but he doesn't care. The spotlight becomes brighter with every step he takes into the darkness, and the light feels like a palpable thing when he enters, like a field of energy trying weakly to keep him out.

There is a girl with brown hair and puffy blue eyes crying in the metal folding chair. The girl stops when he enters the light, and looks up at him with a mixture of fear and recognition.

"Hi," he says, "What's your name?"

She folds her arms around herself, curling inward.

"Mommy told me not to talk to strangers," she says.

He squats down to her eyes level, a goofy grin on his face.

"My name's Shinji," he says, "Shinji Ikari. So, you know my name, right?"

A small, unsteady smile spreads on her face.

"My name's Ichi," she says.

"So we're not strangers anymore, are we?" he asks.

Her smile goes a little wider. She sits up straight on the chair as the shape follows Shinji, a blackened, soot covered hand grabbing him by the shoulder.

"**You cannot save them. You cannot be with them. You are alone. You are fading away.**"

"Then why am I here?" Shinji asks with a smirk, "Oh, I can tell you why. Because you can take your message of loneliness and isolation and you can *shove it.* There's a little girl here and she needs my help."

He's whirled about, facing his own distorted, miserable mirror image. Shinji grins, his eyes glowing blue in tune with the beating Core he feels under his feet. Five words change everything as his distortion's face contorts in the limitless depths of its rage.

"I will not run away."

*

*

"I wish that I could turn back time," she says, "Because now the guilt is all mine. You can't live without the trust from those you love. I know we can't forget the past. You can't forget love and pride. Because of that, it's killing me inside."

A small, goofy smile crosses her face.

"That's something from a song I like," Asuka says, "But…I guess it's what I had to say. I don't know if you're hearing this, or if I'm j-just talking to a v-void. But we miss you. I miss you. And do you want to know why?

"Because it's a world worse off without you in it. Does that make any s-sense? Well, to me it d-does. Because I think you've made my life worth living. I know I probably just look at things w-wrong because of everything I've b-b-been through, but I can really, really say that I think you're the f-first person to make me realize I'm worthwhile. Does that make sense?"

Biting her lip, the smile shaking but becoming wider, she clicks the walkie again and waits, pausing.

"I…h-haven't known you for that long," she says, "B-but I'm glad I have. A-and I don't want to lose you so soon, either. I d-don't know why I'm saying all this. Maybe I want to b-believe you're out there. I want to believe you're l-listening and you can hear me. So I guess the only thing I can do is tell you everything. I don't want you to be dead because you make me actually…feel good. You make me worthwhile. You tell me I'm everything I never *thought* I was. You have done so much for me, so I'm trying to save you. Because, you've done that for me over and over again. I think…I think you've s-saved me from what I c-could have been, if that makes any sense."

Tears are streaming down her cheeks, sniffling as she wipes her eyes with the back of her shirt sleeve.

"So…I don't know if you can hear this, Shinji. But…well, if you can't, you can't. But, maybe I might as well continue…"

*

*

The double's face contorts in rage. For a moment, Shinji snaps back, still in the Entry Plug and sees it. The light is gone, drawn away by the naked exposure to the voice, and leaving it showing its true face. A being as tall as Unit 01, black coal like skin and a simple, almost comically featureless face save for the eyes and thin line of a mouth open in a scream.

Snapping back to the room, the doppelganger holds him fast. Cold rage simmers over him, an unearthly shriek escaping its warbling lips.

"**You will not be free. You will not escape. You will rot here, always, alone like any other creature that dreams of being-**"

"Shinji?" Ichi asks.

He turns, ignoring his sputtering mirror, as the girl slides out of the chair and walks over.

"She's calling for us," she says.

*

*

"I started just by looking up to you," Asuka says, "I started because you stood up to Mother, which no one ever did for me, not even Uri. I started telling myself that you wanted me around because me being in the plug let you defeat that Angel in the Pacific, but it took me a while to realize it. I didn't want to be around you for any of those reasons, Shinji. Not just because you were nice to me, not because you kept saying those things around me that made me feel better. Not because you protected me so many times when you didn't have to. I…I don't know if you're hearing this, Shinji. But…but I think..."

*

*

"…but I think I might be falling in love with you."

"Asuka?" he asks.

Ichi nods.

"You are *not* alone," Ichi says.

The grip on his shoulder loses the pressure and loses the weight.

"She's calling for us," she says, "It's time to go home."

Shinji nods, and grabs the wrist of his double, of ADAM, and pushes him away.

"Follow the path," Ichi says, "I'll protect you."

He squats down to her, placing his hand on her shoulder.

"You're really Ichi, aren't you?" he asks, "You're the one I've been talking to?"

She nods, her face splitting in a ear to ear smile.

"She figured it out," she says in a small, quiet voice, "She knows, and she found me. And she found you. And since you protected me against Him, I'm going to protect you."

The darkness parts, a path of light leading into the distance splitting

the silence. Her voice, distorted in the distance is his tether, and he walks towards the light as the double watches, a mixture of anger and horror on his face.

He moves to follow, but finds Ichi blocking his path.

"You will not touch him," she says.

*

*

In the void, Unit-01's eyes light up like two yellow suns.

"Level 10 functionality unlocked. Releasing final limiters."

The armor of Unit-01 splits, the chest armor parting as the Core shines like a red star. The armor around the jaw parts, releasing the bindings upon its mouth as it growls, and the face of ADAM can only watch in shock as it witnesses the light issuing forth.

The First Angel becomes a silhouette as the light around Unit-01 becomes iridescence, as eight wings of white light unfurl-

*

*

The walk breaks into a run. Every step is weight, like running uphill through mud. But this does not stop him. This will not stop him.

He is not alone. They are waiting for him back home, and every step will bring him closer. No matter what, he is going home today.

There is struggle in the distance and the stench of something burning, but he follows that bright shining light at the end of this path. Every step takes him higher and as he runs, the face becomes more and more sheer, harder and harder for him to follow.

But he doesn't care.

As he drags himself up the path like a cliff face, he can feel the weight upon his leg.

Looking down, he sees the blackened, soot covered doppelganger

hanging on him, dragging him backwards.

"**NO!**" He screams, "**NO! You can't GO! You CAN'T LEAVE!**"

Gritting his teeth, Shinji digs his hands into the path and brings his foot up.

"I," he screams, bringing it down, "Have had! Enough! Of *YOU!"*

Again and again he brings his foot down on the face of ADAM, until finally, he sees for a moment the view from the Entry Plug as the blackened form of the First Angel drifts off into the Void…

And Shinji continues climbing. With every gasp he brings himself closer. With every step he comes closer to home. The weight is choking, and unbearable, but he follows the voice as the light comes closer and closer and closer

*

*

Asuka feels the hand on her shoulder, turning to see Yui standing next to her chair. Dr. Ikari's lip is trembling and her eyes are red and puffy, and she takes the walkie from Asuka's hand and places it on its cradle.

"We should go," Yui says, "It's been five days, Asuka. There's no way his life support can hold out this long."

Asuka stares at her, eyes wide. Balling her hands into fists, she shakes her head as the tears begin flowing down her cheeks. Central Dogma has received its staff for the day, from the other bridge bunnies taking their places to Misato waiting behind Yui.

"I…thought this would work," Asuka says.

"I hoped it would," Yui says, eyes closed, "I really did. You tried you best, Asuka, but…we should go. You need your rest."

She rises, barely of her own accord. Almost as quickly as she does, she collapses against Yui, lip trembling and shoulders hitching. Arms wrapped around her, Yui presses her lips to the top of Asuka's head, clenching her eyes shut. She whispers reassurances to the girl, her own tears already wetting her cheeks, squeezing her tight.

"Dr. Ikari?"

So wrapped up in the misery, in the loss, it takes Yui a moment to realizes Maya is staring at the screen, her eyes wide as saucers. In fact, every member of the bridge crew has their eyes locked on the main screen, as power meters go off the chart, alarms blaring through the entire base as the screen locks onto a single point in the downtown of the city, at a single spot above one of the wider streets.

The same spot where the last battle was decided, where now…

*

*

A single spot of light appears at the exact same spot ADAM was vanquished. It appears like a twinkling distant star, as rings of white wrap around it and expand out into an outlined sphere more that 200' high. It fills with white light, the outlines of eight white wings forming at equidistant points as the entire city shakes with the unleashed power such an entrance brings.

The sphere solidifies, resembling nothing more than a winged egg hovering dozens of feet above the ground. White light pours forth from it, cracking it and causing it to distort and collapse as a form becomes evident.

And then the howl fills the air. Not the berserker howl, but a more knowing one. A triumphant roar, as the distinctly humanoid shape forms and two purple and green feet slam into the cement.

*

*

New screens open up as the form becomes visible, beginning its almost comical lurch towards them. The jaw still hanging open, the armor having seen better days, its eyes glow white as it leans on high rise buildings for support.

But all doubt is gone. The horned visage of the lost traveler fills the screen as vitals, telemetry, and relevant data run their length over the screen.

"It's Unit-01," Maya says with a smile, and quickly takes her spot at the console, "Dr. Ikari…I'm getting readings from the cockpit. Vital

telemetry's coming back as positive."

Shoulders shaking, eyes wide, Yui brings her hands up over her mouth as Asuka stares with an ear-to-ear smile plastered on her face.

"Shinji?" she asks.

The screen blinks, opening up to show an exhausted, haggard, but most importantly alive face.

"This is Unit-01," he says, *"I'm sorry if anyone was worried, but we sort of got stuck there for a while."*

The entire bridge crew erupts into cheers, save for Yui, who grabs Asuka and pulls her into a tight hug.

"Good girl," Yui says, with a wide, toothy grin.

"Welcome home, pilot," Misato calls out with a smile, "And you're damn right you gave us a scare! Kindly refrain from doing anything that stupid in the future, alright?"

If she were able to, Yui would give her a glare. As it is, though, the head of Project E laughs, holding Asuka as tightly as she can as the tears flow freely down her cheeks.

"Will do," Shinji says with a small grin, *"Um…Dogma, I hope you don't mind, but Unit-01's just about out of power. And we're both exhausted. So I think we're going to pass out right about here."*

*

*

The back of Unit 01's neck pops off, dropping to the cement as the white glow of its eyes begins to flicker. The Entry Plug pops out, and despite the fact that it shouldn't be able to, Unit 01 reaches back and grabs it, gently pulling it out and holding it in its massive purple hand as it lurches forward to one knee, kneeling as the glow begins to dim.

As recovery crews swarm out of the Geofront, the purple titan rests the Plug in its hands, held outward as the glow subsides.

And another day dawns on Tokyo-3.

*

*

Eyes open to see, with relief, the white tiled ceiling of the infirmary. Groaning, he sits up, blinking as he feels every muscle protest in their soreness, grunting and laughing as he looks around and pinches himself to confirm that this is, indeed, real.

"Hi."

Turning to the side of the bed, Asuka blinks off the fatigue as she sits up. The shaky smile crosses her face as he stares back, grinning from ear to ear.

"Welcome home," she says.

"Thanks for bringing me home," he responds.

He reaches out, taking her hand, thumb running along her knuckles as his eyes lock with hers. He can see the puffiness, see the red inching along her blue, feeling on his hands five days of sweat, fear and hope.

"I heard you," he says, "That's what brought me back. I can't describe how it was, except that it was so easy to think about fading away and drifting. Except…"

"Except?" she asks.

"Except I knew people were waiting for me," he says, "I was not alone. Thanks."

She's out of the chair and on him, arms wrapped around him and her face buried in his chest. His arms encircle hers and he rests his nose in her hair, both of them laughing, giggling, before they both collapse onto the bed.

"Asuka?"

No reply, save for a soft snoring. He tilts his head and sees her contented, smiling, sleeping face on his chest. Lying his head back, a happy smile on his features, he rubs his hand over her back and sighs. Things like that can wait. He has all the time in the world.

Although, he does start to wonder something. Why was she the only one waiting for him to wake up?

*

*

Somehow, Rei got the cattle prod and has since been sitting in the chair in front of Shinji's hospital room. Occasionally pressing the button to let the arc of current run across the prongs, it is the mere threat that keeps the entire Command Staff of NERV, the pilots, and Shinji's friends waiting outside in the hall.

"They need their alone time," was all Rei said.

Touji shrugs, walks in front of the crowd, and proceeds to grab the door handle.

It is only due to the sound proof walls that Shinji doesn't hear the zap and scream.

*

*

"And so, Father is lost to us. We must reconsider our goals."

Pacing in the deep, subterranean cave known to no mortal being, Kaworu Nagisa folds his hands behind him and sighs.

"The Lilim are resilient, and strong. They have done many things with their technology we did not anticipate. So, I suggest an alternative. We must pool our resources together, and maybe find some measure of cooperation to counter their threat. And maybe, we can find our own path to Divinity."

He turns, staring into the darkness, at the great mass before him.

"What say you, Brother?"

The mass shifts. The great metal grimace turns to Kaworu and the eyes light up with recognition.

"**AGREED,**" Zeruel booms.

Chapter 19: Below the Decks

Key into ignition, turn. A seven year old combustion engine sputters to life and purrs, gray smoke shooting out the tail pipe as the new driver taps her fingers on the wheel. Glancing downward, her eyebrows raise as she spots the radio and begins tapping through channels. In succession, heavy metal, rap, classic rock, classical music, and Japanese pop begin streaming through before she starts playing with the volume controls.

The three adults outside the car watch as the hairline crack appears on the driver's side window before the music cuts off.

"I don't see why we have to do this," Kozou Fuyutsuki says, "Isn't her top running speed somewhere around seventy miles per hour?"

"I think it's healthy for her to have some level of normalcy in her life," Yui sighs, "Her getting a driver's license is one of those."

"Really."

"I never said she'd get a car," Yui responds, "Right, then."

"One!"

"Two!"

"Three!"

Three sets of hands shoot out, one an open hand, one scissors, one a closed fist.

"Not it!"

The three highest ranking adults in NERV stare at each other. Clearing his throat, folding his arms, Gendo Ikari stares.

"Get in the car, Fuyutsuki."

"No fair," the old professor says, "I called 'not it!'"

Gendo unholsters his gun, leveling it at Fuyutsuki's head.

"Get. In. The. Car."

"You're going to have to shoot me, Gendo," Kozou states, "I am not teaching Rei how to drive."

Gendo's thumb pulls back the hammer.

"This is insane," Kozou states, not even flinching in the face of a non-Rei related death, "Don't we outrank everyone in the base?"

Yui raises and eyebrow, nods, and pulls her husband's arm down.

"He has a point."

The base's speakers crackle to life, the Commander's voice filling the hallways and the air of Central Dogma as the Bridge Bunnies look up.

"Attention staff," Gendo states, *"Lieutenant Shigeru Aoba, report to the Motor Pool immediately."*

-

-

Chapter 19: Below the Decks

-

-

Mari introduced herself to the class and took a seat next to Aida and Suzuhara. Why, they don't know, but it's not something of great import to the two of them right now. The students cheered when he entered that morning. Both his leading the battle against ADAM and his subsequent disappearance for five days, which NERV had actually publicized as Shinji making sure the Giant of Light, the Angel responsible for Second Impact, had not come back.

So, he was officially a Big Damn Hero.

Great.

Asuka is quietly taping away on her laptop, and the screen she has open isn't any email server he recognizes, or even a program he recognizes.

"What's that?" he whispers.

She shushes him, narrowing her eyes as she types out code, lips

moving in some sort of unspoken code.

"Hey, Ikari…"

Perking an ear, he turns to see one of the girls in the class leaning over him. This shouldn't be a problem, but the period now is study hall, which translates to 'free time'. Chidori Kaname is, as the term is usually used, a looker. Tall, shapely, flaunting the school dress code by wearing a shirt one size too small and usually with a couple of buttons open, she shows off her assets as she leans over his chair.

"Um…hi?" he responds.

"So, I was thinking," she says, tracing her tongue on her teeth, "Since you're the big man on campus now, and we have that dance coming up next week…"

Asuka doesn't turn, continuing to type on her keyboard.

"Please get to the point," Asuka mutters, "You're blocking my light."

"What is that, anyway?" he asks, turning from the girl back to Asuka.

"Pet project," Asuka mutters, "Busy. Concentrating."

"Riiiight," Chidori says, tracing her finger on his shoulder, "Freak. So… as I was saying, why don't you and me and-"

"Rei," Shinji adds.

"Heee~ey."

He doesn't pay attention to the squawk and sounds of struggle behind him, staring at the computer screen while a small smirk appears on Asuka's lips. That wasn't the first time a girl in his glass has hit on him, but since he came back from the Dirac, he's had a little less patience for this sort of thing.

"What'cha doin'?"

Rei peaks her head between the two as a high school age girl stumbles away behind them.

"Nothing," Shinji says, and stop, staring at her, "Say, Rei? Didn't Mom take you out of school for you to get a driving lesson, today?"

*

*

"…so, we noticed that she's been tense, lately," Yui explains, leaning on the Commander's desk, "And we can all see why, to. She has become very attached to Shinji and Asuka, and now that both of them are safe, she does need to unwind. So, we decided to give her an enforced day off."

Sitting in the single chair in front of the Commander's desk, the Commander's hands tented and the Commander watching him as he alternates between the two Ikaris, Hyuga Makato nods.

"Um…I don't see how I fit into this, yet."

A grunt from the man behind the desk causes Yui to glare at him before she turns back to Hyuga.

"We need someone to make sure Misato takes the day off," she explains, "Keeps her out of the Geofront or doing work. Since you are a friend of hers, we're going to ask you to do this."

He looks from side to side. Slowly turning back to Yui, remembering stories of what happened to the last guy who tried to 'handle' Katsuragi's day and the sad, sad state they found the poor bastard in, he swallows. It is no secret that he's attracted to Katsuragi, but at the same time he knows what happens if Katsuragi gets pissed off. The term 'testicular torsion' has been used commonly with the name 'Ryoji Kaji' for a reason, after all.

"..me?"

Yui sighs, staring at her filed nails. It is the disappointed sigh, the guilt sigh. It is the sigh that wraps Commander Ikari around her finger every time whenever she needs something done that he does not instantly provide.

"I only ask," she says, "Out of concern for a friend. And you would do this, right? For a friend?"

He shrinks in his seat.

"You don't fight fair."

"Finally, someone else notices," Gendo intones.

She turns, leveling her gaze on the Commander.

"Did you say something, dear?"

"Nothing at all," Gendo says, not missing a beat, "Just burped."

She narrows her eyes, considering his defense for a long moment before turning back to Makato.

"Alright, I'll do it," Hyuga sighs.

"Good," Yui says, rewarding him with a smile, "Go see Dr. Akagi. She has suggestions."

*

*

"Um slow down, slow down, slow-"

"RAMP!"

The sedan picks up speed, weaving out of traffic before hitting the construction ramp and flying over the work area and landing on its rear wheels with a squeal from both the car and the driver/pilot. At the wheel, gripping the steering wheel with a grin plastered from ear to ear, Rei squeals as she re-enters the highway traffic, swerving in front of a bus and slamming her foot down on the accelerator.

Shigeru Aoba grips the handle above his window, his knuckles white.

"S-so," he squeaks, "How's school?"

"Oh, it's fine," Rei says, swerving into the left lane, "Say, you look reaaaally tense. Are you tense?"

"A little," Shigeru whimpers.

Her eyes light up as she spots something in the distance.

"RAMP!"

Flooring the accelerator once again, the 7 year old olive sedan rides up the back of an empty car carrier, launching off the top and dropping onto the highway ahead of it. Aoba's breathing is coming in sharp, hoarse spurts as he begins to hyperventilate, wondering why he

hasn't done so earlier.

"You need to learn to relax," Rei says, popping open the glove compartment and taking out a CD, "Take some joy in your work. Do you like music?"

Popping the CD in, the car starts swaying from side to side as guitar rhythm issuing forth from the speakers.

"I left my home in Northfolk Virginia/California on my mind," Rei sings, swerving into the right lane, *"Straddled that Greyhound and rode into Raleigh and on across Caroline,"*

"Is this Elvis?" Shigeru squeaks.

"Mm-hm," Rei says, as the car swerves back into the left lane, "Detour!"

The car picks up speed once again, Aoba clenching his eyes shut.

"Someone help me get out of Louisiana/Just help me get to Houston Town."

He opens his eyes to see the road signs.

"People there who care a little 'bout me and they wouldn't let the poor boy down. Alright now!"

And the car enters the tunnel.

*

*

Sitting under the shade of one of the trees near the recess field of Tokyo-3 municipal high school, Asuka purses her lips and types in the last of the code. Unwinding a USB cable from her backpack, she connects it to her lap top and presses the enter button. The contents of the bag glow, and she sits back against the tree with a smile.

"I was wondering where you went off to."

She looks up to find Hikari standing over her, Shinji and Touji next to her.

"This is the project you've been working on?" Shinji asks.

"Y-yeah," Asuka says with a smile, Shinji helping her stand, "I was just going to find you, but I th-think this is as good a place as any."

She reaches into the backpack as the glow subsides, unzipping it and pulling out a small object wrapped in black plastic. She pulls it off and unfolds the object, which they realizes at first glance is vaguely humanoid, but soon enough they see the blue hair and red eyes which quickly spark with life.

"Is that…a Chibi Rei?" Hikari asks.

"It was the only one Ibuki-Sempai could spare," Asuka sighs, holding in her arms a one foot tall facsimile of Rei Ayanami, complete with a red and white frilled toddler dress and a gem on her chest which resembles an Angel's core, "Back during the early days of the Eva program, t-they used these as intermediaries between the Evas and the c-crew."

"Little mechanical avatars?" Shinji asks, scratching the back of his head.

"On widgets, usually," Asuka says, opening the back of the mini-Rei's neck and flicking switches, "They stopped using them when Unit 00's avatar tried to stab Dr. Ikari with Dr. Ibuki's pen. But, I connected this one with a bluetooth connector and wrote some program code and… okay! This should work."

The red eyes light up. The blank expression twitches before the mouth opens with a wide smile.

"Say hello, Ichi."

"Hello," the doll chirps, tilting her head, *"Hello, Shinji. It is good to speak to you again."*

*

*

When they told him Misato was tense, he understood tense as meaning she was stressed. Considering the last two weeks, that would be understandable. First there was ADAM, who Katsuragi was a direct witness to during His first rampage, and then Shinji disappeared for

five days. Even if it has been three days since his return, she should still be on edge, which is why Akagi suggested taking her to a bar.

"It'll be fine," Akagi said, "Her bar tab is worked into our operating budget."

"Say…you know what's good? Coffee? Coffee coffee coffee coffee coffee coffeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee I'll have another thanks!"

Her fingers tap along the table as the waitress walks back into the kitchen and comes back with another white porcelein cup full of black sludge. Grinning, she grabs the cup and begins chugging as Makato watches, not sure what exactly he is watching.

"So I was thinking," Misato says, eyes wide and unblinking, "I wanted to quit drinking but quitting takes a while and I don't have the time. Sooooo I still wanted something in the morning and I thought that you know what normal healthy people have when they wake up?"

"Coffee?" Hyuga chances.

"COFFEE!"

Her left hand curls and twists as she sucks her teeth, the caffeine-induced spasm passing with a final, pained intake of breath.

"So anyway how have you been doing?" she demands/asks, "You know what? I think I'm also stressing because I have two kids under my roof who'll start humping at any moment know what I mean?"

"…maybe," Hyuga says, "Say…um…have you tried Decaf?"

Her head tilts, eyes narrowing at him as her lips twist and teeth grind…and like a wind up toy, her head snaps back to normal.

"Nooooo."

Hyuge sighs, and forces a grin. An afternoon off with the woman of his dreams. Can't be that bad. Well, at least Maya gets to keep her normal routine, today.

*

*

The elevator ticks down to level B53, which she remembers is right

above level EE, or the entrance to Terminal Dogma. Currently, the depth she is at is around the same level of that diamond mine in South Africa, although she doesn't need a hard hat of any type.

"Sempai?" she asks.

Stepping out of the elevator, Maya walks down the well lit metal hallway, divested of any decorations save for the occasional GEHRIN logo. This is the pre-NERV area, back when Unit 01 was first contructed. Considering what she knows, she guesses this is the level Naoko Akagi hid herself in during her final years.

"Maya. Good."

Ritsuko Akagi sweeps back her brown hair and grimaces, looking at the open set of double sliding doors as Maya walks up to her.

"You said it was urgent, Sempai," Maya says.

"It is. Maya, there's an orange box in my office," Ritsuko says, walking into the well lit room in which seven ten foot high tubes are displayed, "I'll meet you up there. We have a situation."

Akagi sighs, reaching into a yellow box by the first tube and taking out a double barrelled shotgun.

"Sempai?"

"They're loose," Akagi says, "Saddle up, Maya. We're hunting *Ree."*

*

*

The foot tall simulacrum of Rei Ayanami shakily walks, much like a toddler learning its first steps. However, this time the crowd is not the friends from school but fellow pilots, which this time includes Uri, who had taken his lunch break to scout out the school.

"I want to argue to Mother that social interaction will help my synch scores," Uri responds, watching the animatronic warily, "I find that if you frame it in context to the Evangelion, Mother will agree to anything."

Ichi has begun studiously examining a blade of grass. Most likely she has never seen things on this scale.

"Ichi also has a video camera and audio uplink," Asuka says, sitting in the shade of the tree next to Shinji, "So she can see and hear in real time. But, that's not the m-main reason we wanted you to meet her."

Standing in the shade with them, Uri, Mana, and Mari nod.

"Okay," Mari says, adjusting her glasses, "What's the main reason, then?"

"Ichi is Unit 01," Shinji says, "She's the AI of the Eva."

The three others pilots pause, as Ichi looks up at them and gives off a muted wave before picking up a dandelion and in a flurry of claws and fingers reducing it to a cloud of formerly plant like dust.

"Does that mean Unit 01 is a 200 foot tall version of Ayanami?"

"Thanks, Uri," Mana responds, glaring at the German, "I'd gotten tired of being able to sleep at night."

"You'd have to ask my Mom," Shinji says, finding his hand on Asuka's own, "But she's not that great at giving out information. Or at least making you think you've gotten an honest answer."

"And in other news, the Pope's catholic," Mari says with a roll of her eyes.

"Really?" Uri asks, "I though the Vatican was underwater. With Rome."

"They moved it to Geneva," Mari responds.

Asuka clears her throat, rising.

"Excuse me," she says, "B-bathroom."

She walks off towards the school, Ichi watching her go before turning back to Shinji and walking over to him.

"She's kind of passive for the avatar of a stomp bot," Mana points out, "Hey, Ichi? How does this work, exactly? How smart are the Evas?"

"I am unsure of Unit 02," she says, folding her legs Indian style, *"Unit 00 is angry, constantly. I am content. Now that I can speak to others. It gives me purpose."*

"Purpose?" Uri asks, "What purpose?"

"My purpose is to protect Shinji," Ichi responds, *"It is the purpose given to me by Dr. Ikari when I first became aware in 2007."*

Shinji leans forwards, face going blank, then blanching.

"Wait," he says, "Are you telling me they already knew I was a pilot nine years ago?"

Ichi turns, and pauses.

"Dr. Ikari can explain. I do not have pertinent information…-power cells exhausted entering shutdown-"

The eyes go dim, and Ichi's head slumps forward.

*

*

Washing her hands in the sink, Asuka sighs with a smile on her face. It isn't bad, this situation. She is getting attention and praise and while it's not from Mother she's starting to think Mother might not be the end all and be all of her existence. Shinji was especially happy to be able to talk to Ichi, and they all told her this device she figured out was absolutely brilliant.

"Heee~ey."

She smiles as she turns around to find her best friend standing behind her with a goofy grin on her face and her eyes for some reason pointing downward.

"Oh, you m-missed it," Asuka says with a sigh, looking past Rei at towards the bathroom's ceiling high window, "The little project I was w-working on turned out fine. Now we can talk with Ichi."

Rolling her shoulders, her smile brighter than she's ever remembered it, Asuka basks in the warmth of what has to be one of her best days ever. Turning to the sink, looking herself in the mirror, her smile goes even wider.

And then Rei reaches underneath her arms and starts squeezing her breasts.

Asuka's eyes go wide and the sound emitting from her lips resembles a dying mouse. She squeaks as Rei presses against her back, nuzzling

her neck before looking over her shoulder at the objects in her hands.

"Ooooooooo…they're so *soft,"* Rei coos, "And big! I never knew they were so big!"

Hands snap out and Asuka simply watches as her best friend completely forgets the concept of personal space. On one hand, this is inappropriate. This is very inappropriate. On the other hand, she's never had friends like Rei before, so this could be normal.

And furthermore, the most constructive voice says, while a gross violation of personal space…she's starting to question whether or not she's enjoying this.

There is a rush of air and Rei collapses, sliding down her back and to the floor, four bright orange needles sticking out of the back of her neck. Maya climbs in through the window, taking a lawn and leaf bag out of her knap sack and shoving Rei in.

"Number four, bagged and tagged!" she yells into her cell phone, "Right! Meeting you at the cafeteria!"

Maya throws the bag over her shoulder and runs out, the door swinging shut behind her. Asuka slowly relaxes, her mind trying to process what just happened. Not just the molestation by her best friend, but the save by the resident combat lesbian.

Reaching up, she gives her breasts a tentative squeeze, raising an eyebrow.

"They're…big?"

She turns on her heel and walks out. Maybe she should get Shinji's opinion.

*

*

The Rei is standing still, looking perplexed and curious at the chemistry lab's cabinet. She is planning something, maybe taking mental note of ingredients. Ritsuko advanced silently, approaching from the other side of the schoolroom, angling for the best shot. Each dart contains enough tranquilizer to put an elephant into Dreamland, and she has four aimed right for the back of this Rei's neck.

There was the faintest rustling of cloth against a chair. Ritsuko freezes, then drops, ducking down. She'll have to risk the shot, aiming the shotgun at the Rei. She sniffs the air, freezing, and turns slowly to bring her face into profile.

And Akagi sees that she's smiling.

Crap.

Movement to the sides, and Akagi brings the rifle to bear on the Rei that flanked her, almost point blank and staring down the two barrels of the shotgun. The Rei pauses, ready to slip sideways either behind the bench or out the window.

And then Akagi looks past her, and sees in the reflection of the cabinet glass the other Rei behind her and ready to pounce.

"Clever girl."

*

*

"Soooooooo I was thinking. If we got everyone to drive like this, don'tcha think it'd make the roads a lot emptier? Right? Amiright? Amiright?"

"AAAAAAAHHHHH! AAAAHHHHH! HELP ME! LOVE OF GOD, HELP ME!"

Most people notice the car driving upside down the intercity tunnel and blame a trick of light, mostly because the sheer speed seems impossible for a seven year old olive sedan. The cell phone beeps, and Rei looks at hers, sighing before handing it to Shigeru.

"I can't use the phone and drive," she says.

He fumbles the phone, hair hanging to the roof as Rei deftly avoids ceiling lights.

"Y-yeah? Hyuga? Hyuga, where the F__ are you?! You're WHERE!? NO! NO! NO I CAN'T HELP YOU! GOD CAN'T HELP ME!"

He pauses, staring at the phone as his friend blathers on and on about his situation.

"Well *F__* YOU! I don't care if you're at the karaoke bar! I don't care if it's the one of the Commander likes! I'm about to DIE!"

Rei grins, showing teeth, and spins the steering wheel in a circle. The car swerves, turns, and accelerates back down the tunnel. Laughing maniacally, Shigeru only grips the arm rests for dear life as the exit the tunnel, the car cartwheeling before landing on its wheels and driving off into the city.

*

*

The back of the old NERV station wagon opens up, and with a heave, Maya tosses the first of the lawn and leaf bags into the trunk, piling on the three bags as she turns and watches as the doors of the cafeteria open and Ritsuko comes out with two more bags. Her skirt is ripped and her hair is mussed, and she swings both into the trunk.

"Sempai?" she asks.

"Ambush," Ritsuko says, "These two were found with the Aida boy."

"Is he alright?"

"He'll live," she says, "Traumatized, but he'll live. But I'm sure he'll never think of turnips the same way, again."

"Excuse me, Doctor Akagi?"

The two turn as Uri approaches, an unconscious Rei over his shoulder.

"She tried to jump me," he says, "And put her hands down my pants."

"Are you alright?" Maya asks.

"I believe so," Uri says, screwing his face, "Confused, but I believe so. Is there something I should be aware of?"

"No, of course not," Maya says, grabbing the Rei and tossing her into the trunk on top of the others, "We're heading back to the Geofront. Remember, synchronization test at 0900 tomorrow, Uri!"

Ritsuko guns the engine and Maya hops into the passenger seat, and the car drives off.

*

*

They didn't have time to fix their hair or change due to the nature of the emergency. The car itself was sent to a cold isolation area of the garage where the Ree could be picked up while they talked with the expert. So, hair disheveled, clothes torn in some places and generally wrinkled, the two scientists run onto Dogma, sweating and panting as they skid to a stop in front of the head of Project E.

Yui Ikari turns as Ritsuko and Maya approach her, eyebrow raised.

"Is there a problem?" she asks, "You both look…stressed."

"Oh," Maya says, tapping her fingers together.

"And you were both off the grid today," Yui adds, "Is there something going on between the two of you?"

Ritsuko sucks her teeth, looking from side to side.

"We…had to do something," Akagi says, "Together. A group activity."

"Yes," Maya says, smoothing back her hair, "It…we needed to do it alone. It was very, very sensitive. Took us all over. And very physical."

Yui purses her lips.

"And we need your help on this," Akagi adds.

"I'm…not quite sure where you're going on this, Ritsuko," Yui says.

Maya sways back and forth on her feet, looking side to side while Ritsuko finally sighs and places her hands on Yui's shoulders.

"Doctor Ikari," she says, "There's a situation and we need to discuss it, soon."

The central screen flashes, replaced with a massive image of Rei.

"People of Tokyo-3," she announces, *"I am now in control."*

"Or we can talk about it right now," Akagi adds.

*

*

The car is embedded halfway into the karaoke bar. Shigeru has begun praying to a statue of Buddha which doubles as the bar's keg, crying as he holds onto the statue for dear life, with Makato sitting next to him and sipping a turpentine martini. Rei is running around, arms in the air, shouting that she can, in fact, make anything fly.

Gendo Ikari, Supreme Commander of NERV, liked this karaoke bar. As such, he has come to personally retrieve his adopted daughter after rectifying the other matter. There are veins popping on his forehead, which none of the patrons see as everyone save for the two bridge crew, himself, Rei and the target of his current gambit are unconscious with tranq needles in the backs of their necks.

Misato Katsuragi stares at him, a twitch in her brow, the occasional caffeinated spasm causing her to avert her gaze from her superior officer.

He picks up the can of Yebisu, pops the cap, and slams it down in front of her.

"Drink your *God Damned Beer."*

*

*

"People of Tokyo-3," the Rei says, for some reason in a white jump suit, sitting in the elevated chair and stroking the Persian cat in her lap, "I have taken over this satellite NERV base on the outskirts of Tokyo-3, and am in control of the Anti-Angel missile defense batteries. These are my demands."

She pauses, her face neutral, her voice monotone.

"I demand one million helicopters and one dollar."

*

*

"She's…taken over the forward Anti-Angel base," Yui says, and palms her face, "Let me guess, we had a Ree break out?"

"I thought we caught all of them," Akagi growls, "And…that's my *cat!"*

Maya sighs, sitting at her station. This looks like a longer day than she anticipated.

*

*

The Rei unfolds a piece of paper and looks back at the camera.

"I demand an explanation, in 300 to 500 words, of the inner meaning of the poem Walden. It should have an introduction, two body paragraphs, and a conclusion. It must also be typed."

*

*

Shakily, Misato takes the open, sixteen ounce can of beer and brings it to her lips. Quickly, she brings it back, draining the entire contents as the Commander, the bridge crew, and Rei watch before slamming it down on the table with a howl. The shakes and spasms and wired look is gone as a grin crosses her face.

"I've got a plan."

*

*

Rei tilts her head and walks over to the bar, picking up the polished metal hand held object, like a pistol with an almost nonexistent barrel.

"What's this?" she asks, holding it out and brushing her thumb along the button in the back.

Gendo would explain it is a hand held tranq launcher.

If he was not then hit in the neck with a tranquilizer dart.

*

*

"I demand a live production of *Springtime Cherry Blossoms."*

The cat meows, and Rei looks down before nodding and looking back at the camera.

"Mr. Fluffles demands that his former owner begin feeding him Fancy Feast instead of canned tuna."

One of the staff of the base wanders into the camera, quickly apologizing before ducking under and going back to his console.

"Sorry, ma'am!"

"You may live," Rei says, and turns back to the camera, "I demand Pilot Ikari brought to me, dressed only in blue ribbons. Ms. Asuka Langely Sohryu is to be brought to be dressed only in red ribbons. Doctor Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu is to be brought to me in a box. Air holes are optional."

*

*

Yui taps her foot as she stares at Ritsuko, the brunette Akagi sighs as she palms her face. Demands so far have also included 'an elephants weight in perogies' and 'a decommissioned school bus and mountable turret gun.' The problem is, this is a serious threat. The forward base controls enough firepower to level a quarter of Tokyo-3, and this being Rei the possibility of explosions are real.

"I demand that Dr. Ikari declare I am her favorite."

"Well?" Yui asks.

"Dr. Ikari, I have it covered," Misato's voice rings out, *"In three…two…"*

Something moves behind the Rei. She reacts, ducking out of the way of a chop, grabbing Kaji by the arm and slamming him face first into her chair.

"Great plan," Yui sighs.

*

*

Grunting, the manacles lock around Kaji's wrists and ankles. Trying, he finds struggling to quickly be in vain, not able to get any leeway on the table as he looks up to find the Rei staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Did you think that was going to work?" she asks.

"Was hoping," he says, and sighs, "Okay…so…you really think you're going to get away with this? Kid, I've seen Dr. Ikari angry. Angels die when Dr. Ikari gets angry. You do not want to get her any worse than upset or disappointed."

He groans, turning to the now shrugging and talking amongst themselves NERV personnel as he tries to angle himself upwards.

"Did any of you think this was weird?"

"Well, we thought it was an exercise," one of them says with a shrug, "Pilot Ayanami came in here, took control, and demanded from the city enough ice cream to feed an Evangelion."

"And none of you thought this was out of the ordinary…right. Pilot Ayanami."

He sighs, leaning back on the table, watching as the Rei takes out a small, single button remote control.

"You will tell me what countermeasures NERV has to this base," she says.

He smirks, the same smirk he always has when he knows he has the situation under control.

"Rei," he says, "Do you expect me to talk?"

"No, Mr. Kaji," she says, "I expect you die."

She presses the button. The ceiling overhead opens, revealing a massive waldo on which an equally massive, six foot in diameter buzz saw is mounted.

The engine chokes and starts, the blade spinning as it begins to lower

towards him.

"Why does NERV have a buzz saw this big?" he asks, looking from side to side, "Okay, she'd better be in position…I feel like a moron doing this. Say, Rei? Ever watch any of those old commercials they would show in the States during the 80's?"

She raises an eyebrow, pursing her lips.

"No. I have not."

"Then this is going to go right over your head," he says, "Hey! Kool-Aid!"

The entire base shakes with the impact. The ceiling tears down the middle, the blade stopping and lifting back up as they realize it is in fact the ceiling rising as sunlight pours through thanks to the massive metal hand that has removed the roof.

"**OH YEAH,"** Jet Alone Prime booms, and brings its fist down.

*

*

"That seemed too rehearsed."

"No secret the JSSDF has a plan for NERV going nuts."

Riding the elevator next to each other, Kaji smirks and finds Misato rewarding him with a smirk of her own. Standing behind them, Asuka leans on Shinji, face still screwed in thought on how exactly to bring up the subject of her breasts with him. Perhaps Misato would have an idea.

"This ought to be a show," Kaji says, grinning, "They're still transporting the seventh one back. Mana accidentally dropped her to the basement level, so she'll be back later."

The doors open. The four walk down the metal hallway to the wooden mausoleum doors and enter, finding six chairs set up in front of the desk of the Supreme Commander, in which there are six identical copies of Rei Ayanami. As Yui explained, they each have names. From left to right, they are Iti, Siyon, Nana, Hatchi, Kiko, Zyuu, and absent and on her way back from the forward base is Kei.

"I am VERY disappointed!"

Yui Ikari's face is bright red. She is pacing and ranting and yelling. The Commander is completely calm, sitting with his hands tented and unless the light is playing a trick on them lightly drooling on his desk from the aftereffects of the tranq dart, with Fuyutsuki standing next to him.

"Hgfl," Gendo adds.

"I agree," Kozou says.

"You held the city hostage," Yui shouts, "You destroyed NERV and civilian property! You terrorized pilots and staff! At least one of you deflowered Kensuke Aida in a boys bathroom!"

Shinji chokes, shuddering from the visual image.

"What do you have to say for yourselves?" Yui demands.

"Well, Kei held the city hostage," Nana pouts, "And she's not back yet."

"You're not helping," Yui growls, "And she gets an earful just like you. I am very disappointed in all of you. You know I am working to allow you more time in the surface, but acting like this puts you in danger and makes me and your father upset. You are going to go back into the MAGI and you are going to all write apology letters to Dr. Akagi and Dr. Ibuki for your behavior. Understood?"

"As far as I can understand," Kozou says, sighing as he looks in the yellow folder in his hands, "They got out because the passwords expired. Originally, resetting the B53 passwords was the responsibility of Lieutenant Aoba. He passed that on to Lieutenant Makato, and…"

"Wonderful," Yui sighs.

"Mgrrl," Gendo adds.

All six Ree bow their heads, mumbling apologies.

"Although I might add," Fuyutsuki says, "It's really your fault we have these many Reis to begin with."

A sharp intake of air and Yui's gaze swings directly towards the Commander's desk. Gendo reaches under the desk and depresses a button, disappearing as an emergency tunnel opens under his chair.

"She's not really angry," Shinji whispers to Asuka.

"How can you tell?" she asks.

"She's not making up words, yet."

"Go back to your *flurgen* rooms," Yui growls towards the Ree.

"Okay, now she is," Shinji says, grabbing Asuka's wrist, and pulls her out with him.

*

*

The black sedan drives lazily through the outskirts of Tokyo-3, towards the populated areas and the entrance to the Geofront. In the back seat, Kei, the last of the Ree, folds her hands on her lap and looks impassively out the window. She senses it, first, but sadly such warning is too late.

A spot of black appears on the street, expanding out to cover the entire street in a concentric circle about fifty feet wide. When it disappears and the normal street is restored, the sedan, the passengers, and a sushi stand unfortunate enough to have been set up there are all gone.

Chapter 20: The Courtship of Uriel Sohryu

"Good morning. My name is Uriel Dolheb Sohryu. I am the pilot of Evangelion Unit 02 and also the brother of Miss Sohryu, who is sitting next to my fellow pilot Mr. Ikari. It will be a pleasure to work with you all."

Forcing a smile that shows too many teeth, Uri walks from the desk into the classroom and finds an empty chair next to Mana, who grins.

"How'd you manage this?" she asks with a chuckle.

"If you put it in terms of Eva, Mother will agree to anything."

He nods to Asuka as she waves to him, turning back to the board as the teacher begins the lesson.

At the head of the class, studiously taking notes, Hikari Horaki looks at the corner of the screen as the chat box opens and sees that it is, indeed, a message from Rei.

TEHREI: Heee~ey. How's Phase 2?

She sighs, switching between notes and the chat with deft precision so not to attract the teacher's attention.

MagicalGirlHikari: Phase 2?

TEHREI: You knowwww, getting Shinji to ask Asuka to the dance. What's your plan?

Hikari furrows her brow and then raises her eyebrows and sighs.

MagicalGirlHikari: I was thinking have Asuka anonymously sent some flowers, lead her back to Shinji and put him on the spot.

TEHREI: Okay. My plan was like that. But it involved C4 and the base elevator system.

MagicalGirlHikari: Wait. How, praytell, does that help?

TEHREI: Oh, I was just gonna have them locked in the elevator for a day. They're alone, they confess their feelings. You know. ROMANCE!

The teacher leaves the room, muttering something about a prostate

and water pills. The students begin talking, Touji and Kensuke talking about plans for that afternoon loudly in the back of the room and Rei loudly chomping on a rice ball.

By the windows, Shinji turns to his neighbor.

"Say, Asuka?" he asks.

She looks up from her computer program, lines of code taking up the entire screen.

"Mm?"

"Are you doing anything Saturday?"

She thinks for a moment. She takes out her PDA, clicking open the calendar and shakes her head.

"Great," he says, "Um…Well, I was going to go with the other guys to that dance they're holding in the gymnasium. Do you want to come along?"

She smiles, nodding.

"Th-that would be great," she says, and turns back to the computer.

Rei stops in mid chew. Hikari stares at them and turns back to her computer.

MagicalGirlHikari: Well, I have to see if I can return those flowers.

TEHREI: And I got to see if I can smuggle those explosives back into the stock room.

-

-

Chapter 20: The Courtship of Uriel Sohryu

-

-

Neither he nor Mother are all that good at cooking. In fact, out of the three of them the only one who could really create anything edible was Asuka, so when she moved in to Katsuragi's apartment they

managed to get by on NERV issue food and take out.

To that effect, he realizes the cafeteria food is actually an improvement.

He thinks it is rice and chicken somehow mixed and formed into a solid block. If it is, then it is a solid, if not entirely sane substitute which approximates the same effect. Mari has saddled up next to him at the lunch table, a boxed lunch in front of her. On his other side, Mana has sat down with a brown bag that she is emptying the contents of.

"Is this fruit?" he asks, stabbing a red mass on the tray with a fork, "I don't know what it is."

"I've got extra," Mari says, placing an apple on his tray.

Mana snorts and puts a pear on the other side, glaring at Mari as the glasses wearing girl narrows her eyes.

"Yes?" he asks, "Has anyone noticed we seem to have more room than we should at this table?"

The bench on either side of the girls and Uri are empty, people wisely keeping their distance upon realizing the situation. One does not get between girls and their prey, after all, even if the prey does not realize the existence of the Hunt.

"And we have here the conclusion of a successful mating ritual. Observe how the male is almost oblivious to the needs of the females, instead eating his kill while the females size each other up in preparation for their competition, which may take the form of a wet t-shirt contest or knife fight."

"Ken."

Turning his gaze from the camera screen, Kensuke Aida turns to Touji and Shinji as they stand with him in the corner of the cafeteria, in direct line of sight to Uri and the two girls.

"What are you doing?" Shinji asks.

"Seeing where this will go," Ken responds, "The habits and ritual of the human female have now become a point of fascination to me, following my recent awakening."

The two stare at Ken. Shinji palms his face, sighing.

"What did Rei do to you?" Touji asks.

"I am never telling," Kensuke responds, turning back to his film, "But it was *marvelous."*

*

*

"I feel kind of guilty," Rei says, "No one told Kensuke about the others."

"Other…Reis?" Hikari asks, standing next to Rei underneath the tree outside the lunch room, "You mean the ones that showed up two days ago, right?"

Rei nods. She leans in and whispers something in Hikari's ear, and the pigtailed girl's eyes go wide before she pales.

"They…did they do that to Kensuke? Is that even *possible?"*

"They made it fit," Rei shrugs, "Soooooooo now that we got Shinji and Asuka, what about…"

"Uri?" Hikari asks, and strokes her chin, "Mm…tough one. I'll admit, he's easy on the eyes. But it looks like he already has two girls chasing him. And two pilots, too."

Rei nods.

"Well," she says, "Which one do you like?"

Hikari sighs, shrugs, and leans against the tree.

"Mari seems to have a good head on her shoulders," she says, "And she gave me some nice fashion tips."

Rei nods. Turning on her heel, she walks towards the crowd of students at recess. She begins cracking her knuckles, students wisely moving out of the way. The sight of Rei Ayanami is disturbing enough. The sight of her cracking her knuckles is a cause for terror.

Mana is talking with Asuka, talking with her about the upcoming dance as well as tech tips for Jet Alone. It is only when Rei is right in front of them that they notice her, as Rei rolls her shoulders and grins.

"Hey, Ayanami," Mana says, "Need something?"

"Wanted to try something," Rei says with a grin, "Duck."

Her fist swings out. The air ripples in responds and a layer of dust blasts off the wall, the entire student body staring in dumbstruck, mute horror at the idea, which is not truly alien, of Rei Ayanami randomly deciding to clock someone. There is also another aspect of the scene which is cause for alarm.

Mana's arm had come up, catching Rei's forearm. The red eyed girl's eyes go wide as Mana glares at her, before the red haired girl ducks out of the way and darts to the side.

"What the Hell?" she demands, "Ayanami, have you gone nuts?!"

"Not yet," Rei says, and grins, her smile going wider, "Oooooo…I've never seen someone block me, before!"

"Never seen someone with eight years JSSDF and EDF training, then," Mana says, "Okay, then. This is a test?"

Rei nods, as Mana backs away, wheeling back as the students quickly part, not even the Seniors wanting a piece of this action.

"Fine," Mana says, "Alright."

She grins, cracking her knuckles, rolling her arms back as she tosses aside her school jacket and tosses Asuka her watch.

"I think I was probably going to do this after the dance, but it's been years since I could have a good scrap. Let's dance, Ayanami. I'll lead."

*

*

When she needs to beat people over the head psychologically and make them do whatever she wants, Dr. Yui Ikari, head of Project E, uses her husband's office. Despite popular belief, it was Yui who finalized the design of the massive, darkened mausoleum to fit the intimidating nature of the tasks at hand. The target of her current

affections are the former couple sitting in front of her.

Kozou is planning on retiring. Hence, Pieter Sohryu has taken more and more of Fuyutsuki's tasks, and the bags are already forming under the red haired man's eyes, more and more gray creeping along the short cropped head. He is in a crisp, professional dark gray NERV uniform and sitting at attention.

Kyoko, on the other hand, is sitting with one leg crossed over the other, arms folded, her expression somewhere between a smirk and frown. Her white labcoat is wrinkled, but her sweater and skirt at clean, pressed, and impeccable. As always, she has something better to do, and this is of course combined with the fact that it is no secret Yui doesn't like her. Mostly, this stems from the problems with Asuka, but also from Asuka's recent breakthroughs that allowed them to save Shinji following the ADAM battle.

"Here's the situation," Yui says, "Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi and Inspector Kaji are both indisposed. We have Katsuragi on enforced vacation and Mr. Kaji is making sure she keeps to it. Additionally, Doctor Akagi and Doctor Ibuki have both called in 'sick' these past three days."

Kyoko snorts, looking away.

"In which case," Yui says, "We need chaperones for the school dance tomorrow evening. And I am hereby volunteering you two."

Kyoko starts, turning and glaring at Ikari. Pieter grins, sitting back.

"Okay, I'm game," he says, "What time?"

"You're *agreeing* to this?" Kyoko snaps, turning to him with a glare.

"Why not?" he asks, "I haven't spent nearly as much time with the girls as I wanted to, and this seems like a good opportunity."

"You're Sub Director of NERV!"

"I'm pretty sure if we weren't available, the Commander would be doing this," he says with a shrug, Yui chuckling, "I'd be happy to. I'll coordinate Section 2 with the activities and talk with Katsuragi about any concerns. I'm presuming the Children will get special pickup?"

Yui nods, and frowns as her phone rings. She picks up her cell phone, staring at the message, her gaze turning into a hard glare as she

mentally processes the text.

"Oh, dear *Lord."*

*

*

Mana launches herself, spinning in mid air as she snaps her heel out into a kick which could justifiably take off a normal student's head. Rei ducks underneath, dashing off of the crouch and onto her hands, pushing herself off and swinging into a bicycle kick which catches Mana in the stomach and launches her several feet before she lands on her back with a grunt.

Flipping back up, she couchs, padding her fist with her other hand as Rei is already on top of her, grabbing Rei in mid punch and flipping her over her shoulder, Rei landing on her feet and locking her arm around Mana's own.

Mana swings a knife hand to Rei's throat, Rei catching it and bringing her face to face with the redhead, who pulls and slams her forehead into Rei's.

Both yell out in pain, breaking the lock and backing off. Rei rolls her head and flexes her fingers as Mana pounds her fist into her hand and drops back into a fighting stance, grinning.

Both pause, sizing each other up. The air around them hangs with tension. The other students watch with concern, fascination, and horror. The girl, they conclude, is about to ger Reiped.

Mana kicks off first, lunging into a jumping punch as Rei counters with her own. Two punches hit two faces and send both of them flying back, both rolling to their knees and standing. They walk towards each other, slowly, knuckles cracking and eyes locked on each other. They circle, slowly, a grin splitting Rei's face before she lunges and grabs Mana in a hug. Mana squeaks, Rei squealing in joy and swinging her around.

"That was *AWESOME!!!!!"*

*

*

"Rei has a new friend," Shinji says, watching with one eye wide open, brow raised as Asuka stares with a completely blank expression.

They both sigh, walking back towards the building, the first to break away from the crowd and back towards the building. She smiles, shaky as always and tries to lean a little closer. He smiles back, a confident, genuine smile.

"So," she says, "Um…when do we meet for…"

"Well, we were going to meet everyone there," he responds, "You… well, you know we'd go together. As…"

"A couple?"

He starts, eyes snapping wide. Her smile breaks, her body tensing. Hands begin to ball into fists, the nails digging into her palms as her teeth grind. *Stupid,* she tells herself, *Stupid stupid stupid stupi-*

"Yeah," he says, hands hands finding themselves on hers, "I'll call this a date if you do. I do owe you lunch, and…well, you saved my life."

She smiles again, her shoulders relaxing and her nails withdrawing from her palms. Nodding, she begins walking back to the classroom ahead of him, her smile fading and eyes closed as she breathes slowly, calming herself, telling herself to not react like that, it can drive him away, and *she doesn't want to drive him away.*

*

*

"I like Mari," Hikari says, folding clothes as the afternoon sun sets behind her, Nozomi watching enraptured as Hikari continues discussing her day, "She seems nice, she's got a nice sense of humor, and seems to play off Uri pretty well. So, I think I'm going to try to set up her and Uri."

*

*

"Mana's the closest I've come to a fair fight in years," Rei says, clapping her hands together as she explains the fight, standing in front of Yui and Gendo in his office, "That was great! Sooooooooo I think she has a crush on Uri, so I'm gonna set them up!"

Yui and Gendo look to each other, and Gendo shrugs.

"Anycase," Yui says, stepping off the desk and clearing her throat, "Since your sisters had their little…adventure…we wanted to discuss appropriate behaviors concerning boys with you, Rei. Dear?"

He takes out a bag and places objects on the desk. A bouquet of flowers, a turnip, a cattle prod, and an empty tranquilizer pistol.

"Rei," he says, "Which of these are appropriate for you to bring on a date?"

Rei stares, raises her eyebrows, and nods.

"None of them."

"Very good, Rei," he says with visible relief.

"I just use my teeth and hands!"

Yui palms her face.

"Maybe not," Gendo says.

*

*

"Uri needs to socialize," Kyoko says into her voice recorder, pacing her office, "Socialization leads to attachment, which leads to higher synchronziation ratio. So, it makes sense to pair Uri with a fellow pilot."

She taps her fingers on the mic, pursing her lips.

"To that extent, as I have determined that Ayanami is insane, it is to my determination that the best social, romantic, and sexual engagement partner for Uri would be Pilot Ikari. I will present these findings to Dr. Ikari following the debasing task of being forced to chaperone the…school dance."

She chews the inside of her cheek in thought, sitting on her desk.

"I am certain Dr. Ikari will agree whole-heartedly with my assessment, as this will also keep Pilot Ikari away from the distracting influence of the girl."

*

*

Misato has changed to a bright pink fuzzy bathrobe and sipping tea at the kitchen table as the door opens and Shinji and Asuka walk in. She levels her gaze at the both of them, nodding her head at the table as they both sit down, Shinji glancing at Misato's cleavage before then looking directly at her face. Asuka is beaming, as if the smile has been carved into her face all day. Misato knows why, of course.

"So," she says, "You're going on a *date."*

Asuka nods. Shinji twiddles his fingers.

"Do I need to explain the birds and the bees to you?" Misato asks.

"God, no," Shinji coughs, "My father did that when I was thirteen."

"I…learned from the internet," Asuka adds.

Misato sighs, palming her face, twiddling her fingers and taking out her PDA.

"Rules," she says, "You're both back before eleven. I know you're more or less grown up, but Shinji, I have no need to make your Mom angry at me. No hanky panky. First base only. No drinking. Especially my beer."

Shinji nods. Asuka continues smiling.

"Now that that's out of the way," Misato says, "You two will have fun tomorrow. Asuka, Mari will be by early tomorrow morning to get you prepared. Shinji, you have a synch test tomorrow morning."

"Okay," Shinji sighs, "Are you chaperoning the dance, Misato?"

She shakes her head, sipping her tea.

"I'm on enforced leave," she says, "Just to give me time to relax since I

haven't taken a vacation in four years, and we don't see Angels coming for at least a few days. I think they're tapping Ritsuko and Maya to chaperone."

*

*

Coughing miserably, Ritsuko Akagi starts, rolling her eyes up before she pitches forward in the bed and sneezes. Adjusting the hot water bag on her forehead, she lies back down and groans, holding one hand up over her face and counting ten fingers.

"Maya," she moans. Silence is her response.

"MAYA!"

Grumbling from the living room, shuffling of cloth and the angry mewling of the cat as Maya, clad in blue bunny pajamas and a pink bathrobe appears in the doorway.

"What is it, Sempai?" Maya Ibuki moans, bags under her eyes and her face the color of fresh death.

"Need more tea," Ritsuko moans.

Muttering under her breath, Maya grabs the tea cup and starts walking out, clearing the doorway before another cry splits the silence.

"MAYA!"

"Yes, Sempai?" Maya asks, rolling her eyes.

"Water!"

Padding her feet along the carpet, Mr. Fluffles follows her, hopping onto the kitchen counter as Maya begins boiling water.

Whistling to herself, running on Dayquil and coffee, Maya calmly walks over to the locked kitchen cabinet next to the refrigerator. Taking a knife, she jams it into the lock and hits the knife with the can opener, breaking the lock and pulling out a bottle of whiskey.

"MAYA! TEA!"

"Coming, Sempai!"

She brews the tea, waiting a moment to watch it darken. Unscrewing the cap of the bottle, she hums to herself as she empties the whiskey into the tea, turning the bottle right side up and taking a long drag from it herself.

Reaching into her robe, she takes out a bottle labeled 'Spanish Fly', crumbling a capsule in her hand and sprinkling it on the tea.

"MAYA!"

"Coming, Sempai!"

And whistling, grumbling, she shambles back to the bedroom.

*

*

One arm wrapped around the doll, the smile hasn't left Asuka's face all day. It didn't collapse. It didn't go bad. In fact, it went exactly as she hoped it would and it wasn't that bad when he looked her in the eye and asked her if she wanted to go with him. There wasn't a question of what her answer would be, of course. Even with that little faux pas afterwards she didn't mess it up.

She is exhausted from the excitement, though. She hasn't been this tired in some time.

"You'll have a great time, Asuka," the doll squeaks, "You just need to relax. If you make him uncomfortable, he might react badly."

"I know," she moans, "And I don't want to make him unhappy, but… what can I do for him? Mother says I should just…throw myself at him, but does he really want that? He says he likes me, but I don't know what will happen if…"

"Of course he likes you, Asuka," the doll squeaks, as Asuka holds it at arms length in front of her, "But maybe he also cares about you, to! So that's why he hasn't done those things Mother wants!"

She sighs, hugging the doll close as she lies down on her bed. It is right. This room, much bigger than her one at home, is comfortable and safe. She has everything she wants, everything to keep her

content. And yet…for the first time, she is feeling a need for something more. The words she spoke over that walkie into the Dirac still echo between her ears.

Is it possible?

Is she actually falling in love?

Her mind swims, tightening her grasp on her advisor, her friend, her voice of reason. Maybe she is. But what if he says no?

What if he says yes?

Her knees curl up to her chest, her arms wrapping around her as she lies on her side, heavy eyes closing. Questions burning in her mind, body fatigued from the events of the day, Asuka drifts off into a pleasant, soft sleep.

*

*

The ride up from the Geofront apartment he stays in with Mother to the surface of Tokyo-3 takes forty five minutes. During that time on the Tram, Uri is expected to read. Originally, it was operations manuals and field guides, with the Art of War mixed in because it wasn't supposed to be monotonous.

As he is going up not in the capacity of NERV, he has decided to dress in a spare school uniform, minus the jacket. In his hands is a copy of War of the Worlds, a present he received from Asuka shortly before they left for Japan. He doesn't have much time to read between synch tests and other duties, and has worked this into his schedule by always reading on the Tram.

The bell signals the arrival to topside, and he grabs his bag, stuffs the book in and walks out into Tokyo-3 proper. Unlike his other pilots, he can blend in. Ikari bears no small resemblance to his mother and Ayanami is…Ayanami. So he, just being a thin, sixteen year old boy with reddish blonde hair doesn't stick out any more than his sister does and…

Oh, right.

Clicks his tongue, and moves into the crowd, a little flaming torch in

the sea of black and brown.

An arm wraps around his, and he sees the red and the green eyes as Mana grins, pulling him from the crowd and into an alleyway of street vendors.

"Hey, Uri," she says.

"Hello, Kirishima," he responds, and pauses, "What are you doing?"

"Getting your attention," she says, rolling her shoulders under her grey sweater, "So, you're going to the dance tonight?"

"Dance?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"You know, kids get together. Boys sit awkwardly on one side, girls on the other. No one does anything, girls start crying. It's a lot of fun, especially when someone mixes alcohol into the punch."

Uri purses his lip, scratching the back of his head.

"Really…"

Mother mentioned something about a dance, and how she wouldn't mind if an Angel stepped on the school. Ah, yes. That dance. He didn't say anything to upset her on the subject, and generally ignored her when she started to talk glowingly about Ikari for some reason.

He would believe Mother is trying to set him up with Ikari, but that would be outright ridiculous.

"So, going?" Mana asks.

"I don't know," Uri sighs, "Mari was interested in it for some reason."

"Well…" Mana says with a grin, leaning forward, her hands folded behind her, "I was thinking of going myself. You know, because all the other pilots are going. I mean, for one thing I think I might have taken a shine to Shinji, and I mean not romantically or anything like that."

"Why are you telling me this?" he asks.

"Well, because he's going with your sister," she sing songs, "And I wanted to make sure he doesn't try anything dirty with her. Don't you?"

He grits his teeth, nodding.

"Right," he breathes, "I should be there, to!"

"Great. Meet me there at six."

"Understood," Uri says, and pats Mana on the shoulder, "I owe you for this, Kirishima!"

With that, he runs off to take care of his business for the day. Watching him go, or more in particular watching his butt as he goes, she grins. Reaching into her pocket, she snaps out her cell phone.

"Hook, line and sinker," Mana says, "Pretty Boy has fallen for the bait. Cancel plan B."

*

*

On the overlooking rooftop, Rei sighs and closes the radio detonator.

"I never get to do plan B."

Behind her, holding the bazooka, Kensuke shrugs.

"All will be as it will be," he breathes, "What destruction shall we sew next, Rei?"

She thinks, screwing her face in thought. With a squeal, she pumps her fist into the air, pointing to the horizon.

"Come along," she shouts, "Next, we wire the school! For blackmail!"

"And *great Justice!"*

*

*

The door opens to Yui's office, and she smiles as, without her needing to prompt him, Shinji takes a seat in front of her desk. She finishes signing off on a report, placing it in a slot on the side of the desk as the pneumatics take over and send it through a clear tube to another part of the building.

"Well, we're not getting a synch rating near 300 percent," she says

with a smile, "But it is holding at around 80. So, you're still steadily improving, but I didn't ask you to come here for that. So, you start."

He sighs, leaning ack in the chair.

"Why didn't you tell me Ichi was Unit 01?" he asks, "And for that matter, why did I just find out I was a pilot?"

She nods, folding her hands on her desk.

"Shinji, shortly before I sent you to your aunt and uncle, we found two things," she says, "The first was Rei. The second was that, somehow, Unit 01 was trying to communicate with us. Now, any interaction we would have with it was going to be colored by our knowledge of what it was, which would be utterly horrifying to a nascent intelligence. So, we had to find a way to let it talk with someone who wasn't afraid of it."

"Like a six year old boy," he responds.

"Exactly. That's the same reason I had Rei start emailing Asuka. Both developed their own personalities despite not being human. Because of their interactions with people who did not outright judge them, these personalities were welcoming and protective of humans. The fact that Unit 01 will calm down if it goes out of control is largely thanks to you."

"And piloting?"

She sighs, nodding. The lines on her face are more pronounced, more visible as she looks down, tapping her fingers on her hands.

"I never like the fact that I have to put you in danger," she says, "Your father, less so. But it became obvious early on that it was you Ichi desired as her pilot. We never told you so you could at least have several normal years. Look at Uri and Asuka. Their lives revolved around Eva. You, on the other hand, got to be happy for ten years before we called you back. I'm sorry you weren't prepared, but I'd rather you be surprised than…well, you see what I'm getting at."

Nodding with a heavy sigh, he folds his hands in his lap.

"Now," she says, "I thought you were going to ask about your seven half sisters as well, but I can introduce you to them directly later on. One of them is…away for a bit, but I think they would want to meet you. In any case, you should head back to Katsuragi's and prepare for

tonight."

He nods with a small smile, getting up.

"Thanks for making the time to talk, Mom," he says, "I appreciate it."

He turns and walks out, closing the door behind him. Leaning back, she takes her glasses off and rubs her nose, the book case behind her sliding open and Gendo peaking in.

"He bought it?" he asks.

"Hook, line, sinker," she says, "Half truths. Nothing I said was a complete lie, mind you. We did have Ichi email him as a Turing test, after all. And we did keep trying to get the Dummy system working so he didn't have to pilot."

He nods, walking over and rubbing her shoulders. He grins, a small chuckle from his lips as she stands, resting her arms on his shoulders.

"Kihl has contacted me," she says, "Nagisa has Kei, and is keeping her in chemical hot sleep so's not to activate her S2 organ. Kihl has said, for the 'piddling price' of my daughter, he is giving us the Lance."

"Right when we don't need it," he growls.

"He wants to make this an object lesson," she says, "So do I. I think it's time we became serious about how protracted and messy a death those old men deserve."

"Which one do we start with? 06?"

She shakes her head, pursing her lips.

"Oh, no," she says, "Not him. My father goes *last."*

Chapter 21: Dancing Fools

The dress goes down to the knees, ending in frills, and is green with black stripes around the waist. Most importantly, it has a back, which while discouraging to most teenage girls is absolutely essential for her current subject. Said subject is shuffling back and forth in the clothing aisle with her, obvious that this is her first time really clothes shopping.

"I think this looks perfect," Mari says, "What about you?"

Asuka nervously smiles, holding up the dress.

"I g-guess," she says, "I'm not really that g-good at this."

Mari Makinami shrugs, patting her sister on the back and snapping out a wolfish grin.

"You'll learn," she says, "We all have to, eventually. Besides which, it's a good idea to make his jaw drop every now and then, don't you think?"

Asuka's face turns bright red and her smile goes a bit wider, folding her hands at her waist. The dress goes into the bag with the rest of the clothes Mari decided suited her, along with makeup, brushes, more of the barrettes that she has taken to wearing in her hair.

Hefting the bag over her shoulder, she smiles at her sister, and Mari smiles back. In but a few days, one gulf in her family, one wedged by her mother out of nothing more justified than spite and hate, has been shut.

"So, you're going there together?" Mari asks, "How much has your guardian been egging him on about it?"

"A lot," Asuka says, sighing with a smile, "I think she's h-happy, though. But disappointed that she's n-not chaperoning."

"Well, no need to be nervous," Mari says, slapping her on the back, "Just keep smiling and I'm sure the whole thing'll turn out fine."

Asuka nods, taking her place on the check out line next to her sister.

"So," Asuka says, "Do you have a…date?"

"Sure I do," Mari says with a wide, tooth-bearing grin, "Uri just doesn't know it, yet."

-

-

Chapter 21: Dancing Fools

-

-

He checks his messages, filing the last of the reports for the day and seeing that his daughters were reported together at a local high-class clothing store. Pieter Sohryu grins, shutting off his desk top and shrugging on his coat as he walks out of the office, waving to his secretary as he hops into the lift and lets it speed towards the surface.

The lift jerks to a stop, opens, and his gaze fixes on the gaze of his ex-wife as she steps in and stands next to him.

"Wipe that smile off your face," Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu mutters.

"No," he responds, smirking, "C'mon. Tell me you're not looking forward to this."

"I'm *not* looking forward to this," she mutters, "There, I said it. We're on babysitting duty because Dr. Ikari is cross with me."

He sighs, shaking his head.

"Come on," he says, "Sixteen year old kids, full of life! Whole future ahead of them. It's exciting!"

Another floor ticks by.

"It's insipid," she growls back, "We both have more important things to do than keep the Children of making out with their respective groupies!"

He chuckles as another floor passes by. He leans in, grinning, and she recoils, staring at him.

"I find it hard to believe you're innocent of that behavior," he purrs, "I dunno, this sounds like you're displacing. Your chaperones catch you in a broom closet with your boyfriend at the Prom?"

Her face twists, turning stone like and her gaze narrows on him as he grins back. Her ability to intimidate him, what was left of it, more or less evaporated with that moment of weakness weeks ago, following the 9th Angel and Asuka's episode.

"I had no boyfriends," she says, "Not until you. I think I would have been better off celibate."

He snickers, standing straight, backing away from her as he clasps his hands behind him. The problem, to Kyoko, is that he has been insufferable since he 'scored' with her. Which brings up the next problem: Neither of them are sure they want it to be an isolated incident. They are both professionals. A public affair would be of little good for them or NERV.

"Dressing up or dressing down?" he asks.

"Down," she sighs, rolling her eyes, "I am quite sure Ikari will ship us off to Australia if we do not show. I will meet you at the school."

"Try not to be so bitter about it," he says, and grins, "You should loosen up. Take some joy in your work."

"And you should try keeping your dick in your pants, but we shouldn't make promises we don't keep."

The elevator doors ding, and Kyoko walks out, hands balled into fists. Grumbling to himself, he slams his palm against the door close button, and rides it towards the surface.

*

*

"So, in conclusion, be careful. If you can't be careful, be safe. And if you can't be safe, *name it after me."*

Shinji chokes and stammers, staring at Misato as she gives him a thumbs up and then shoves him out the apartment door, listening to the sound of footsteps as he reaches the elevator and goes off to meet his date.

In truth, she's proud. The past few weeks have given her the opportunity to work out her own issues and find out that, if pushed, she could be quite maternal. She even found herself ranting about

what she would do if someone hurt her 'little girl' as she now mentally refers to Asuka as.

The bedroom door peaks open. Ryoji Kaji peaks his head out. His hair, after much pulling, is frazzled and loose and his stubble is coming close to a beard.

"It's been a week," he groans, "Can I go home, yet?"

"No," she says, and claps her hands, advancing towards the bedroom with a toothy grin.

He sighs. Here comes another *long* day.

*

*

It was decided that they would meet at the gates of the school, the massive brass and iron things that seal off their school life from the rest of the world. Shinji arrived first. He tends to, if only because he walks at a quicker pace than intended. Of course, there was the possibility that Rei was already there. Hiding.

"Ikari!"

He sighs and turns down the street as Uri walks over. It is with a small amount of amusement that he notices Uri is in a NERV uniform. Given, Shinji decided to just not think about how to dress and came in a school uniform, the realization that Asuka's brother decided to have a military presence at the dance makes him smirk.

"Uri," Shinji says, "Didn't know you were coming."

"Kirishima suggested I come to ensure you do not try anything improper towards my sister."

Uri pauses, thinks on that for a moment, and slumps his shoulders with a groan.

"I think I am the last person to get these jokes," he sighs.

"Ikari! Uri!"

The two turn, Uri raising an eyebrow as Touji and Hikari approach.

"How is it you get the first name treatment while I just merit 'Ikari'?" Shinji asks.

Uri shrugs, folding his arms and staring at Touji.

"You two goin' as dates?" the jock asks.

"No," Shinji and Uri both shout back, turning as they hear Mari's voice approaching.

And Shinji's jaw drops.

The dress is hugging without begin form fitting, just a hint of cleavage and leg but enough for his eyes to go wide, giving him a good impression of her hips and waist while not giving much away. Her hair is fixed with the barretts into three waves going down past her shoulders, the red baubles almost shining as much as her blue eyes are when she sees his flabbergasted expression.

"You like?" Mari asks, arm wrapping around Asuka's shoulders, "No, wait. I can see that he does. That, 'Ska, is how you get him to chase you."

It is a merit to Shinji that he barely notices Mari and to Uri that he tries not to stare at his sister, instead double taking at how Mari has made a sweater and a skirt make him suddenly discover girls.

"So," Hikari says, shifting a bit and finding that the skirt and blouse she is wearing feels suddenly inadequate and squeezing Touji's hand to prevent him from staring, "Shall we go in?"

"Yeah," Shinji chokes, his hands finding Asuka's own, "Let's."

*

*

The office of the Supreme Commander of NERV opens up as Kozou Fuyutsuki peaks his head into the door, walking in as he spies the Commander reviewing financial reports at his desk. It is a blessed night of relief, with it being confirmed by Section 2 that the First Child is at the school, not waiting in ventilation shafts and shadows to jump him. Such things take a back seat to news, which the Sub Commander of NERV has come to deliver.

"The Committee has been curious," he says, "They have implied they wish to speak with the Children regarding ADAM."

Gendo looks up and narrows his eyes.

"Yui won't like this," he says, turning back to the reports, "In fact, she'll downright hate it. They're chafing under the idea that we know things they think we shouldn't know."

"Like the possibility Kihl released ADAM to pay us back for Rei's treatment of Nagisa?"

Gendo grunts an acknowledgement.

"Confirm it. Shinji may have to speak with the Old Men."

*

*

They expected Akagi and Ibuki to be in charge, the little bits of unresolved sexual tension between them serving to entertain and titilate. Instead, they got Asuka's parents. Some of the shine in her eyes and spring in her step left the moment she spotted her mother, who was thankfully ignoring her in favor of a cup of fruit punch.

Pieter is greeting everyone. His smile is ear to ear and he's been chatting with Uri and Mari. Mana has arrived, dressed down in a t-shirt, jeans and an army jacket and is watching the entire thing, circling as if planning an attack. And Asuka is still staring at her mouth, brought out of the haze by Shinji squeezing her hand.

"Do you want to go?" he asks.

She starts, staring at him. Her shoulders visibly relax as she smiles.

"N –no," she says, "No, I'm fine."

Two Section 2 agents are on the raied stage in the gymnasium. Balloons and streamers are everywhere, running the length of thewall, giant letters welcoming everyone to the winter festival dance hanging from the rafters and one wall is set up with food and drink.

Music begins to play, soft beats with soft words. Touji and Hikari are already on the dance floor, obviously on her insistance as they unsteadily dance, him looking down to, as he defends, make sure he

doesn't step on her feet.

He feels a tug on his hand. Suddenly, Shinji finds himself dragged onto the dance floor, and almost on instinct his hand wraps around hers, one hand on her waist and hers on his shoulder. As the soft music plays, they find themselves moving with the rhythm, their eyes meeting as the dance begins.

*

*

The band, made up entirely of Section 2 agents, is playing 'Lady in Red.' Mana watches as Shinji and Asuka share their first dance, a wistful smile on her face. It isn't bad, she thinks as she sips the punch, It isn't bad at all. The fact that she spiked it earlier with Rei's help also makes things better. As a child soldier, she isn't a stranger to alcohol. Hell, Kaji practically taught her how to drink.

Young people, their entire lives ahead of them, she thinks as she backs up towards the bowl of fruit punch and upturns a flask into it.

Except for her, of course.

She isn't going to live to see seventeen.

She spots Uri standing near the food table, Mari having left to talk with her father. Grinning, she walks over, brushing off his scowl as he spots her.

"You tricked me," he says, narrowing his eyes, "You played on my worry for my sister."

"Then stop being easy to trick," she grins back, "Though, you being the big old Brother Bear is kind of sweet. What can I say? You don't seem the type to date."

He sighs, leaning on the table.

"That is what I am?" he asks, "Your date?"

She nods.

"I see what I like and go for it," she says, stretching her arms over her head, "It's not going to come to me if I just wait for it. Why waste time on the fickle shit when you can be aggressive and get what you want,

you know?"

He sighs, palming his face. Almost as soon as he does, Mari is there, grabbing his arm.

"C'mon," she says, adjusting her glasses, "If you're going to stand out by coming in uniform, you might as well stand out on the dance floor."

"Might thoughts exactly," Mana responds, grabbing Uri's other arm.

The two girls start, stop, and glare. Held fast and in place, Uri looks between the two of them, recalling tips that he was given by Inspector Kaji, who at one point related a similar situation involving him, Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi, and Doctor Akagi. What was it he said?

"Don't worry, ladies. There is enough of me to go around."

*

*

Throwing down another glass of punch, Kyoko watches as That Girl and the pilot of the JSSDF's F__ You to the Eva program drag her Pilot onto the dance floor. On the other end of the dance floor, her useless daughter who has been getting too god damn much praise is slow dancing with Ikari's spawn. Pieter, the walking tripod, is surveying the dance like a king on a throne.

The only possibility going through Kyoko's mind is that at some point in the past two weeks, she died. She died, and now she is roasting in Hell.

She refills the glass and throws back another serving of punch. She's pretty sure it's not supposed to burn on the way down, but that's not important. What is important is the fact that she, the secondary head of Project E, is chaperoning a school dance.

Somehow, the punch is making it better.

*

*

Kensuke Aida surveys the dance, video camera in hand. Wandering

from his best male friend and the class rep to Uri getting pulled between two hot girls, the camera's gaze wanders over to the dozen girls from their class watching with envy Shinji and Asuka. His gaze wanders over to them, as well. Neither of them are high fashion, neither of them spectacular. Still, the sight of her arms on his shoulders and his hands on her waist, softly chatting while the music plays makes him grin.

"Hi, Rei."

Behind him, Rei stops in mid greeting. She pauses, closes her mouth and walks up next to him.

"Soooooooo is everything set?"

"Mm hm," Kensuke responds, "It's like a beautiful dream. We're going to have *so much* blackmail it isn't funny."

She nods with an ear to ear smile, leaning on him. The music plays. Clapping her hands together, Rei begins skipping towards the cafeteria kitchen. It was a potluck, after all. And no party's complete until she gets to cook.

*

*

The tempo picks up with a pop song, one couple separating as they start walking off the dance floor. Asuka is beaming. No, she is practically glowing, a wide grin splitting her face and her hand almost fused with Shinji's as they exit the dance floor. She knows the girls were watching her, and it is no secret that Shinji's pilot status as well as varied chivalrous acts has made him much sought after.

The fact that *he* asked *her* makes it all the sweeter.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asks.

"Immensely," she responds, squeezing his hand, "Um…"

In addition to the dance floor, there are rows of chairs on either side of the floor and several tables set up by the entrance. By no coincidence, one table is set up exclusively for the Pilots, presumably for Section 2 to keep tabs on them all at once, even if the table is empty.

"I'll be right back," he says, "Bathroom."

She smiles, releasing his hand and watching as he leaves the gymnasium. Sighing, feeling the small rumble in her stomach, she walks towards the food tables and punch bowl, hands fidgeting as she finds standing near the bowl her mother.

Her mother turns to her, raises an eyebrow, and almost falls over, draining another cup of punch and belching. Sighing and deciding to avoid the preferred drink, she reaches into the ice bucket and retrieves a can of soda, reaching for a plate.

"Enjoying yourself?" Kyoko asks.

"I-I am, Mother," Asuka says, hand freezing.

"'bout time you enjoyed yourself at something," Kyoko mutters, draining another glass, "Always moping about like someone ran over your dog. 'Oh, poor little me, poor little baaaaaby.' No wonder Ikari hired you. Otherwise you'd just mope about all the time and make her little boy feel bad for taking you in."

Kyoko fills up the glass again, not even bothering with the ladel but dipping the glass itself in.

"Th-that's not true," Asuka whispers, "That's n-not-"

"Of course it's *true,"* Kyoko mutters, "You're such a good worker, Asuka. It's a shame you're just a *good worker.* You either run the great Dr. Ikari's errands or throw yourself at her little spawn, that's all they want you to do. I'm sure Ikari was overjoyed you ended up with the boy here. No use dancing around the subject any longer. None of us are getting younger and Ikari probably wants her boy to pop his damn cherry already."

Her shoulders seize up, her breath sharp and short as Kyoko drains another glass.

"Th-that's not t-true," Asuka whispers, "I-it's not! H-he asked me to…"

"He wants to get it over with," Kyoko sighs, "Just spread your damn legs for him and stop dancing around the subject. We both know that's why the damn boy took you in, so he could just want to the next room if he got an urge or two. Really, I thought we went over this, Asuka, or have you become *forgetful* as well as flighty?"

She throws back the glass, sighing in contentment as the red fruit punch burns her throat, leaning on the table and laughing. It is a bitter, loud, and throaty laugh, leaning in towards Asuka as her breath burns.

"Y-you're wrong," Asuka whispers, biting the words, "I'm n-not useless. I s-saved-"

"What next?" Kyoko asks, "Talking about saving him? You really thought it was you who brought him back? Stop taking credit for the damn Eva. You have done *nothing* but *embarrass* me since we came to Tokyo-3. I should have left you on a street corner in Berlin with our old *couch."*

She pats her stomach and belches, rolling her head and pushing off the table.

"Well, I have to take a *leak,"* she slurs, "Try not to make a scene."

Singing a dirty German drinking ditty, Kyoko walks out, bobbing with each step. Hands grip the table cloth as Asuka stares ahead, staring at nothing. The entire conversation was soft enough that no one could hear, and it is only after several minutes that anyone notices she has just been standing at the table.

"Asuka?" Hikari asks, "Is something wrong?"

Reaching out, the pigtailed girl placing her hand on Asuka's shoulder.

And that is when Asuka starts screaming.

*

*

She stumbles out of the bathroom, still woozy, now whistling. She ambles over to a set of lockers, playing with one of the combination locks before its snatched out of her hand and a palm is slammed into the metal by her head. She squeaks, turning and finding herself appraising Pieter's bright red face.

"What are you *doing?"* he demands.

"Stuff," Kyoko slurs.

He growls under his breath, looking from side to side.

"You're drunk."

"And tightly wound," Kyoko says with a smirk, "Don't forget that. Let's add 'a massive bitch' onto that while we're on a roll, yes?"

"I have no idea what you just said to Asuka," Pieter growls, "And quite frankly, I'm of half a mind to just send you home and tell Ikari you got a stomach virus. There is something serious wrong with-"

She grabs the collar of his shirt and pulls him in, mashing her lips against his and sticking her tongue down his throat.

He tastes the cheap whiskey on her breath, slamming her back against the lockers as her hands grip the back of his head. Hands grab her wrists and pin her to the lockers as the kiss slowly ends, two wicked grins crossing their faces.

"Let's add 'horny' while we're at that," she purrs.

"This is the single most inappropriate place…"

"Shut up, Pieter. It's time for Germany to invade Japan."

"God, you can make *geography* sound sexy," he growls.

He pushes her against the wall, kissing her again, pulling her from the lockers as they shuffle towards the broom closet to their right. He fumbles the door handle, Kyoko already working on his belt as he drags her in and shuts the door behind them.

God's in his Heaven and all is right with the world.

*

*

Hands gripping her hair as she screams, knees giving way as she pushes off the table and pushes Hikari away, running across the gymnasium and towards the door as the scream turns into choking sobs, pushing aside chairs and tables in her way. The doors slam open, but before she can run out there is a blur of motion and no one can tell exactly where she came from other than the ventilation grate hitting the ground.

Shinji skids to a stop, having sprinted from the gym entrance to the exit, a wad of toilet paper still on his shoe as he looks from the dead

serious Rei to the miserably sobbing Asuka.

"What *happened?"* he demands.

"All we could tell was she talked with her mother," Hikari says, "And…"

There is a grinding of teeth and a sharp intake of breath, and the rest of the student body goes silent when they realize it's Rei.

"Rei, no," Hikari says, gripping the pale girl's shoulder, "Stay. I know what you're thinking, but doing exactly what you want to do right now wouldn't help."

Shinji doesn't say a word, kneeling down as the tears stream freely down Asuka's face, her hands pulling at her own hair as her body curls up into a ball in front of everyone. He gently shoves Rei aside, wrapping his arms around her, biting his lip to keep from saying something to make it worse. Something her mother and what he's going to *do* to her.

"Rei," Hikari says, "Help Shinji get her home. Okay?"

Rei mutely nods, helping the two up. Kicking the door open, she escorts them out, the door slamming shut behind him. Touji mutters a swear, wrapping his arm around Hikari's shoulder as her fists clench.

"Damn it."

Everyone turns to Uri as he swears, digging his fingers into his palms.

"Let's start cleaning up," Hikari says, "I'm not feeling in a particularly festive mood anymore."

"Speak it, sister," Mana sighs, slapping her on the back.

The doors open and two figures shuffle back in. Pieter quickly smoothes back her hair and Kyoko is looking more lucid, staring at the group as they turn towards them.

"Yes?" she asks, "Did we miss anything?"

Dead silence blankets the three dozen or so students in attendance. Knuckles crack and Mari marches forward, pushing Uri aside as he tries to hold her back.

"What the *HELL* is wrong with you?!" she screams.

Kyoko's face twists, teeth bared as Pieter steps forward.

"Young lady, you do not-"

"Shut up, Dad," Mari growls, "Asuka just left here crying. I want to know where you get off doing that to your own daughter, you *sick bitch."*

Kyoko steps forward, pushing Pieter aside. The two come face to face, teeth bared. Mari adjusts her glasses, staring right into Kyoko's gaze and failing to flinch, nostrils flaring and teeth grinding.

"Congratulations," she says, "You managed to completely ruin the happiest night of your own daughter's life. But I can say I expected that from someone as sad and pathetic as *you."*

"How dare you speak to me like that," Kyoko snarls.

"Do something about it," Mari says, "Or do you just like beating on people who don't fight back?"

Kyoko's arm moves. Her hand opens and her shoulder twitches to slap the girl hard enough to send her to the floor, consequences be damned. The moment before the hand would hit the girl, though, it's caught, and Kyoko turns from the girl to Uri as he holds her wrist fast.

"Go home, Mother," he breathes.

He releases her hand, one arm wrapped around Mari's shoulders. The girl visibly deflates as he walks her back to the students as they begin fixing up the gym, fixing the tables back to where they were before Asuka's rampage. The shock sobering her, Kyoko takes off her glasses and rubs her nose.

"F__ this," she mutters, "I'm going home."

She pushes past Pieter, walking out of the gymnasium and into the hallway. Muttering to herself, grabbing her coat from the rack outside the gym as she walks, she wraps it around herself as she mutters swears.

A ventilation grate moves, and she stops.

For a moment, she swears she sees red eyes, or something in the duct work.

Pausing, she walks, more quickly, more urgency in her step. Another

grate moves, then another. A locker opens with a bang right before she passes it and a two by four slams into the ground where she almost stepped.

"Heee~ey…"

Breaking into a sprint, Kyoko clears the last distance to the exit before slamming into it and running off the school grounds.

Kensuke Aida peaks out of the boy's bathroom, walking to the locker and retrieving the last traces of the plastique from it, taking out his remote and turning off the red remote controlled lights hidden in the ducts.

Tapping his video camera and checking the footage, he walks back to the gym, walking in and whistling.

"Hey, Hikari?" he asks, "I got something you're gonna *love*…"

*

*

She stopped crying around midway home, only staring ahead with a vacant expression. Misato was not happy about what happened, swearing seven shades of violence before Shinji calmed her down while Asuka just went to her room and closed the door. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out what to do. So he changed to shorts and t shirt and stood in the middle of his room.

He has never truly hated someone in his entire life. Not like he does now. He wants to find this woman and strangle her. Her death should be messy, bloody, and last weeks. He wants to get into Unit 01, tell Ichi what happened and let nature takes it course before leaving the rest to Rei.

But then he hears the high pitched choking through the thin walls. She is crying again, as she has been off and on since they left the school. Hands ball into fists as he considers the options of going to be or sitting up and listening. Instead, he takes the third option. Walking out of the room, he doesn't bother to knock and swings her door open.

Sitting up, arms wrapped around her knees, her makeup is running. Her dress is on the floor, tossed there while she is in a pink night gown. Her hair is falling over her face, and she barely acknowledges

him as he walks over, picking up a box of tissues and sitting next to her. Almost on instinct, he wraps an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close as she grabs onto his shirt and buries her face in his chest.

"It's alright," he says, "I don't know what your mother said to you, but every last thing she said was wrong."

Her shoulder shake with every breath. Her arms wrap around him, holding onto him like she was about to fall. In many ways, she was. He presses his nose against her hair, smelling the shampoo, wrapping both arms around her.

"S-she said," she chokes, "S-she said I'm an embarrassment. I d-don't d-do anything but embarrass her. Th-that she should have l-left me in Berlin and…"

"She couldn't be more wrong if she tried," he whispers, "I don't know why she did this, but I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she whispers, "I'm not worth it."

He grabs her arms, pulling her up. She averts her eyes, looking downward, looking away as he grits his teeth. Short, sharp breaths as he steadies himself sitting on his knees and growling.

"You. *Are,"* he says, "I would have *died* without you."

"It wasn't m-me," she whispers, "It was the Eva."

"Is that what she told you?" he asks, "Is it? Asuka, I *know* what happened. Do you know what I remember?"

She shakes her head.

"Asuka, I would have died. I could have died. Right there in the Dirac, I could have just…stopped and faded away. I heard your voice. That's what brought me back."

The tears trickle down her cheeks, her own hands tentatively, hopefully touching his wrists.

"It was cold, and it was dark," he says, "I knew I was alone there. And then I heard you. Do you know what I heard?"

She shakes her head, closing her eyes.

"It was…it was you. 'But I think I might be falling in love with you.'"

Her eyes snap open. She looks up, staring at him, her mouth dropping open as the first tentative steps of a smile begin to twitch on her lips.

"I know this night has turned out horribly," he says, "I know what your mother said hurt you so much. But she has no right to doubt you. Every last thing you have done is yours to take credit for. The next time she says you're not worth it, you remember that you *saved my life.* And…geez, I'm just getting sappy."

Her smile begins to form, her mascara already mixing with the tears as she takes his hands.

"No, it's alright," she says, "Just…it's alright. You don't have to."

He smiles, nodding.

"Well, f__ it," he says, "I think I'm falling in love with you, too."

Almost the moment the words leave his lips, his balance leaves him as she lunges at him, tackling him to the bed and pressing her lips against his own. The first time, in the bathroom, comes to mind. The tension and fumbling gives way to a single, slow moment as his hands run through her hair, holding the back of her head as she presses against him.

As the kiss ends, as their breathing returns, her smile widens as she rests her head against his chest, pinning him to the bed.

"Should I go?" he asks.

"No," she states, "No, you're staying right here."

He smiles, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her up closer to him and pressing his lips against the top of her head.

"Sounds good to me."

*

*

The door opens to the office of Dr. Ikari and the two requested visitors enter. Yui looks up from her desk and Pieter and Kyoko sit in the two chairs in front of her desk. Yui taps a set of buttons next to her monitor, and a projection screen drops down.

An LCD projector chokes to life above the doorway and an image forms on the white screen that makes Pieter shift uncomfortably in her seat and Kyoko's mouth drop.

"This showed up on Youtube last night," Yui says, folding her hands under her nose, "It was entitled, 'Pieter and Kyoko make a Porno.' Somehow, the link has been emailed to the entire Command Staff."

Kyoko sputters, Pieter palming his face as Yui glares.

"This is…this is…"

"Yes, Doctor Sohryu?" Yui asks.

"This is…this is being taken down, right?" Kyoko asks.

Behind her hands, Yui grins.

"No."

She presses another button, the projector dying down and the image of two rutting middle agers fading away, but not from memory. Yui folds her hands on her desk, her smile disappearing.

"This is your Idiot Tax," Yui says, "This is the price you pay for having a quickie in the broom closet when you are supposed to be watching the Children and your Daughter."

Her eyes narrow.

"If you ever behave like this again, either of you, I will have you shipped to NERV-Luna for the rest of your lives. And I if I see any evidence either of you are attempting to take it down, I will remind you the reason either of you can walk is because I forbid Rei from harming either of you for what you did to her friend."

She clicks open her monitor, bringing up reports.

"Now get out of my office."

They shuffle out, the door slamming shut behind them. Silently, they walk to the elevator, Pieter jamming the button for up while she presses the button for down.

"You could have stood up to her," Kyoko growls, as his elevator arrives.

"Yeah," he says, stepping in, "And you could have *shut the Hell up.*"

He jams his floor button, and the doors close.

She snorts, fuming, waiting as her elevator arrives. The doors open, and Kyoko steps into the cab next to Misato. The co-head of Project E calmly presses her button, folding her arms and fuming as the doors close.

And as the doors close their final inch, Misato's fist snaps out. On the administrative level two floors up from the Project E labs, Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi walks out of the elevator and smiles a greeting to Lieutenant Hyuga Makato.

For a moment, he sees the inside of the cab, and in particular Kyoko Sohryu holding her nose.

Then he shrugs it off and figures that he's just seeing things. Or at least Sohryu had it coming. Whistling, he starts following Katsuragi with a folder of reports from her week off. And another day dawns on Tokyo-3.

Chapter 22: Puppet Play

They are sleeping on their sides, his arms wrapped around her. Her back is to him, a contented, tired smile on her face with his fingers intertwined with her own. Underneath the covers as they ended up, he is the first to stir, groaning as he finds one arm pinned underneath her and her own grip on him keeping him firmly in place, and looking down Shinji sighs and shifts onto his back, knowing that what has just shown its head could easily ruin the moment.

The door creeks open slightly. Misato peaks her head in, but Asuka still does not stir. Their guardian raises an eyebrow, staring at Shinji as he looks from Asuka to her and shakes his head.

Misato brings up her hand, forming a circle with her index and thumb, and slides her index finger back and forth through the circle.

Shinji shakes his head faster, turning bright red.

Misato visibly relaxes, whistling in relief and dragging the back of her hand across her forehead. She gives him a thumbs up, mouths the words 'work' and 'call' with a phone charade, and closes the door.

Another day dawns on Tokyo-3.

-

-

Chapter 22: Puppet Play

-

-

The knocking on the door makes Yui look up from her work and frown. To say that Pieter Sohryu, Sub Director of NERV, is not her favorite person right now would be an understatement, but her ability to forgive is legendary.

He hopes.

"Got a moment, Dr. Ikari?"

"Perhaps," she responds, "What do you need, Pieter?"

*

*

The door to the apartment opens, and Shinji gives off a tired smile as Mari stares at him in concern, her right hand fidgeting a small red jewel.

"Everything alright?" she asks, "I spent most of the night yelling at my Dad for him screwing up last night, so it'd be nice if my sister hasn't hung herself in her bedroom."

The bathroom door opens. Toweling off her face, still dressed in her night gown and a robe, Asuka smiles as she spots Mari. She jogs over and skids to a stop before pulling her into a hug.

"You alright?" Mari asks, holding her at arms length, "Wait…are you smiling?"

"Yeah," Asuka responds, a shaky smile crossing her features, "Um… Shinji, could you give us some time alone?"

He nods.

"Sure," he sighs, "I'll finish making breakfast. Do you want to join us, Mari?"

"She'll be happy to," Asuka answers, and stands on her tip toes to peck him on the lips, "C'mon."

She drags Mari into her bedroom, the glasses wearing girl staring at Shinji the entire way. Walking back to the kitchen, he goes back to the stove, counting off from ten. On cue, the apartment rocks with the squeal/shriek as Asuka relates the last night's events.

Pen Pen peaks out of his freezer, turning to Shinji before giving him an affirmative nod.

"*Wark.*"

"I hear you," he sighs, "I'm *never* going to live this down."

"*Wark?"*

He smirks.

"Yeah. Not really a bad thing."

The phone rings. He looks at the number, rolls his eyes and opens it.

"Hi, Mom."

"*The exact lengths you have gone to help Asuka never cease to surprise me,"* Yui says, making him chuckle and scratch the back of his head, "*I saw everything. If she hurt herself I would have let Rei go after Sohryu. Good boy. I need Asuka to be at NERV in three hours, and you as well. Understood?"*

"Yeah," he sighs, "Wait, for what?"

"*Asuka's father has convinced me to schedule a synch test between Asuka and Unit 01. You have an appointment afterwards. Some people would like to speak to you."*

The phone clicks off. Sighing, he turns back to the breakfast. It can wait until then.

*

*

"Who needs to speak with Shinji?" Pieter asks.

"The Committee," Yui sighs, "For the sake of 'official' appearances, they will be appearing as their public faces, the Committee for Human Instrumentality. I told them if he is kidnapped or hurt I *will* come down on them, and the Chairman is wary enough to capitulate, even if he still plays his games."

He nods, leaning back in the chair. Hands folded in his lap, face pensive, his gaze wanders from Ikari to one of the hanging blueprints of Unit 01's head.

"Pieter," Yui says, "What you did last night was grossly stupid, but you can make up for it."

"Yeah," Pieter sighs, "So…Shinji is my daughter's boyfriend now, is he?"

"He's been that for a while," she says, "Last night it became… something special to her. He managed to make up for what Kyoko did to her by being the first person in I think her life to do what he did.

I'm pretty sure he wanted to be patient on that, but my son has become more and more empathetic towards Asuka."

"And why's that?"

She grins.

"I think it's because he's in love with the girl," she says, staring at her screen, "Hence why he will be at the test before I send him to the Old Men. If this doesn't work, Asuka will be hurt. Being taken out of the Eva program is one thing. Failing out of it is another."

"She won't fail," he says, pressing against the arm rests and standing up.

"And why's that, Pieter?"

"Because she's my *daughter,*" he growls back, "And it's about damn time I started acting like she *was*."

He exits the office, the door slamming shut behind him. Hands folded, a knowing smirk crosses Yui's face as she turns to a report on Asuka.

"Indeed it is," she says, "You sweet, dear, gullible man."

*

*

Clicking off reports on her PDA, Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu ascends the stairs and walks down the catwalk of Cage 3, the current home of Evangelion Unit 01. Mulling over events of the last day and the hangover currently going to town on the inside of her skull, she walks past the purple demonic visage.

One of the bangs of hair in front of her face moves towards the massive cyborg, before there is a sudden rush of wind and her vision becomes blurry and her body heavier, a wave of force knocking her to the side and nearly off the catwalk.

It takes a moment for her to realize what has happened, removing her glasses and observing the thick layer of mucus covering them.

"Doctor Sohryu! Doctor Sohryu!"

Leaning on the catwalk railing, Kyoko runs her hand over her face and

slides off the thick layer of Evangelion snot, flinging it aside as Maya runs up with a towel.

"Sorry, but Unit 01's contracted an upper respiratory infection," Ibuki says, "We're currently trying to super scale the antiviral to treat it, but…"

Kyoko snatches the hand towel, wiping her face. Maya watches, turns, and quickly runs back, Kyoko staring at her and about to question why. Then another blast of air, germs, and snot hits her dead on, nearly knocking her off the catwalk.

Biting out a German swear word, Kyoko stumbles back onto her feet, dropping the drenched hand towel as she turns to the current source of her torment just in time to take the next sneeze to the face, knocking her onto her back.

The Eva dips its head as the dripping, slimed co-head of Project E climbs to her feet, stomping towards the end of the catwalk.

"I will be in my office," she breathes, and exits. Maya watches the lift doors close, and slowly turns to Unit 01. For a moment, she could swear that there was a back and forth motion of the Eva's head. Like it was laughing.

Can't say she blames it.

*

*

They gave her one of Rei's spare suits, with some modifications. Piling her dress and jacket in the locker, she carefully removes her underwear and piles it on her clothes as she steps into the white and blue pile and starts drawing it up. It feels…odd, is all Asuka can think, visibly shrinking at the thought of the video cameras in the locker room and turning her back to the lockers to hopefully hide the scars.

She pulls it up to her collar, finding it loose and baggy and wondering what exactly Rei does to fill her plugsuit out. Then again, she is not sure if she really wants to think about Rei filling the suit out.

Pulling the zipper up, she finds the fabric hanging from her arms and legs, hanging down from her stomach like a beer gut and making every motion follow with a flapping of the fabric.

Removing her decorative barrets, she fixes the two white A-10 converters in her hair, pulling her hair behind her in the single wave.

"Weird," Asuka says, walking out of the locker room to find Yui and her father waiting, "Um…"

"Is there a problem?" Yui asks.

"Kind of," Asuka sighs, "Um…how do I get it to…fit?"

The elevator door opens. Shinji walks into the hallway, holding a briefcase full of folders and transparencies at the request of his mother.

"Here," Yui says, taking her wrist wrist and pressing the twin buttons on either side. The air hisses as it leaves the suit, the entire suit shrinking and quickly hugging her contours. In a split second, her figure goes from baggy to full defined and skin tight, and she squeaks in surprise as space age fabric shrinks.

"Mom, did you…"

The fabric wraps and tightens around her breasts, then her slim waist and legs, finally shrinking and fully defining her buttocks almost in tune to her squeaking.

Shinji forgets to stop walking, slamming face first into the wall and bouncing off of it to land on the floor.

"Better?" Yui asks.

Asuka shifts from side to side, dancing around as she tries to pick at her seat.

"Oh Gott," she screams, "It's gone right in! It's the worst wedgie I've ever had!"

Pieter looks away. Shinji stirs with a groan and looks up right as she trips and falls breasts first on his face. They both scramble to their feet, tripping over each other as blood begins trickling from his nose and his hand shoots out for support and grabs her ass. Yui simply palms her face, grabs Asuka by the arm and pulls her up as Shinji quickly scrambles to his feet.

"Now that we're done," she says, "Tests await. Come on, Asuka."

Mumbling an apology, she follows Yui out. Shinji watches, tilting his

head as she goes. Blinking, rubbing his eyes, he turns and finds himself staring directly at Pieter Sohryu.

Both are silent. Pieter rubs the bridge of his nose, Shinji shifting from side to side.

"Yeah," Pieter says, "I think we should lay some *ground rules."*

*

*

It is the red jewel on the bracelet she wears that catches Uri's attention first, and resigning himself to his fate, he pulls his cafeteria tray back a little to give room for Mari to sit across from him. She grins, regarding him through her tortoise shell glasses as he continues working down the miso soup in front of him.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Fine," she says, "I checked up on Asuka before I came here."

"And?"

"She's fine," Mari says with a smile, "Shinji calmed her down last night with some…choice words. In fact, she's happier than I think I've ever seen her."

Uri looks up from his soup.

"What did he *say* to her?"

She smirks. He groans, rubbing his temples. Far be it for he to be the sole pragmatic and realist in the entire length and breadth of NERV itself, but apparently the entirety of his sister's multiple problems can be solved by a cliché pained declaration of Love.

"This is a short term solution," he sighs, "If Ikari hurts her, I will *kill* him."

"He's a sweetheart," she says, patting his hand, "In all honesty, he irritates you because you're both alike. Both Mama's boys, both awkward with the opposite sex, and you both have nice asses."

He makes a sound much like a confused dog, staring at her. Well, she does have a point. He does work out a lot, and he hoped an observant eye would notice and-

"Wait," he says, "Are you *flirting* with me?"

"You…honestly didn't notice?"

He screws his face in confusion, rearing back. Shaking his head, rubbing his temples, he makes a long, pained groan.

"We're *siblings,*" he says, "You're my sister."

"Adopted," she says, sighing, "You're Asuka's *adopted* brother. We're not blood related. You know that, right?"

"I am not blood related to Asuka either, and yet I have never thought of her as anything but my sister."

He sighs, folding his hands, taking hers in his own.

"Blood is one thing," he responds, "But family is thicker than blood. You're Asuka's sister, and that makes you *my* sister. I enjoy spending time around you, Mari. I think you're a lovely person, but you are *related* to me."

"And…that's it?" she asks, squeezing his hand, "Uri, to be honest you're not the first boy I've fooled around with. But you're not the typical teenage hormone tank, either. We're not related, so it's not like you hitting on Asuka."

Shaking his head, tipping his gaze to the table, he lets off a long, painful sigh.

"I was raised by Dr. Sohryu," he says, "I have, admittedly not well, protected Asuka as a brother. You are Asuka's sister, and no matter how much Mother hated you…well, maybe there is that as well. Mother has been upset a lot lately, and such things would not help."

"So there's that, huh?" she asks, "Your mother. She's more important to you?"

"She took me in. She did not have to raise me. She chose to. I cannot discard that sort of loyalty easily."

She sighs. Considering pressing the issue, her hand fingering the bracelet, she slumps her shoulders and nods.

"Any case," she says, "Asuka's having a synch test in Unit 01. I thought you might want to know."

"Thank you," he says, grabbing his tray, "I'll meet you there?"

He doesn't wait for a reply, returning the tray to the trash bin and quickly walking out of the cafeteria. Watching him go, she waits for the lift doors to close before slumping against the table and holding her face in her hands.

"F__."

*

*

The entire Entry Plug shakes as it fits into place in the back of Unit 01's neck. Inside it, the five point harness securing her ass firmly to the seat, Asuka squeaks. It feels a little different than last time, although it is given that the last time she was inside Unit 01 was on Shinji's lap. Not that she minded, but…

A video window opens in Asuka's right eye, startling her. She knows how these systems work, but to experience it first hand is not something she adequately prepared herself for. Yui's face fills her right eye, that reassuring smile where it always is.

"*Well, the good news is unlike the other pilot, we're not going to throw you up against an Angel,*" Yui says, Shinji's muted protests in the background, "*So, just relax and we'll walk you through everything. Ready?"*

She nods. The plug shakes again. An outside view shows the daemonic face of the purple cyborg as the lights in the plug dim.

"*First stage set,*" Maya calls off, "*Releasing muscular locks and setting pilot language to Japanese. Second stage set, setting plug depth and ionizing LCL.*"

The hair on the back of her neck stands up. Reaching out, Asuka takes the controls, closing her eyes.

"*Entering third stage. Begin synchronization on three…two…one. Synchro Start."*

A mask of seven eyes flashes in her vision. A small, knowing smile and words in her ears she can't understand. The entire plug becomes warm, the pressure around her lessening. And then…nothing.

Well, it was a start. Calling open a video screen, she gets a view of the control box. For some reason, everyone is standing, even Maya.

They told her that Maya's wearing a plugsuit of her own in order to make her more comfortable, but then there was those stories Misato told when she got home a couple of weeks ago.

"Um…how did I d-do?" she asks, folding her hands in her lap, "I…I didn't mess up, d-did I?"

Silence, utter silence, as Yui turns from the console to the screen and back again. Shoving Maya gently out of the way, she takes the walkie talkie and clears her throat.

"*Asuka, you have a synchronization rate of 48% with Unit-01.*"

Phrases exchanged such as 'Why did the Marduk miss her' and 'Cross Synch' are bandied about. None of that actually is heard by her, though, as the slow realization of the situation dawns on her and her hands tighten around the controls. Eyes going wide, chest going tight, she gives off a high pitched squeal as she begins hyperventilating.

And since this is never a good thing to do in nutrient rich, oxygenated liquid, she promptly passes out.

*

*

The caterpillar shaped craft lands without a sound on the airless rock, the door on the side opening as a young man with ash hair and red eyes walks out, dressed in a white button shirt and black dress pants, bare feet crunching against the lunar sand.

Kaworu Nagisa smiles as his clothes frost over from his perspiration and breath. It is a refreshing, alien chill on his bones as he walks the Sea of Tranquility, warmed by the presence of his Brother sleeping far underneath. It is a shame that the struggle with ADAM ruined the sight of the Apollo landing. He liked it there.

He shifts his AT field around himself to create air and begins to hum,

his feet leaving the ground as he floats. At the center of the Sea, buried deep within Father's vessel, sleeps the forgotten Messenger which shall today be awakened.

The rock stirs. The sleeper senses him. He rises above the sea, arms out and eyes glowing like angry red stars, the Angel of Free Will calls out to his sleeping brethren.

"Hear me!" he shouts, "You know me! And if you do not, you will be *made to know me!* Awaken my brother! Your time to cast down upon the yoke of the Lilim has come!"

A single heartbeat echoes through the airless desert, a crack more than two hundred feet long breaking the landscape.

"Kyoji!" he shouts, "**Rise!**"

*

*

The room is unlit and featureless. Darkness goes as far as he can tell as he walks in, the door shutting behind him. Stepping forward, eyes falling to adjust to the darkness, he mutters a curse as he bangs his shin against a chair leg, feeling around for it before sitting in it.

"*Pilot Ikari,"* the voice booms, "*We have brought you here to speak with you on the matter of the First Angel."*

*

*

"Well, that was certainly a good day," Uri says with a grin, "My sister is now the backup pilot for Unit 01. She was overjoyed by it. It's wonderful seeing her smile."

He turns, his grin going from ear to ear as he walks through the Geofront Entryway, Mari walking next to him.

"Don't you agree?"

"It's nice," Mari says with a shrug, "She seemed happy."

He pats her shoulder, laughing as they approach the massive double

doors that serve as the main exit. It is a good day, a calm day. In Uri's mind, the only thing that could ruin this sort of day is Mother going on a rampage, but something about 'Eva Scaled Colds' prevented her from showing up at the Synch test.

"Hey, Uri?" Mari asks.

"Mm?"

"My kanji's a little rusty," she says, squinting at the yellow sign above the exit, "What does that say?"

He looks up, staring at the sign. He never sees the open hand chop to the back of the neck, stumbling forward before a wave of air sends him flying across the lobby and onto one of the waiting benches.

Dainty fingers crack at the knuckles and Mari grins, adjusting her glasses as her eyes begin to glow blood red. The red gem on her wrist bracelet glows and she extends her hand at the doors, the air pulsing before they are blown off to reveal the legion of red eyed civilians, each hanging a small piece of red crystal somewhere on their bodies.

"Simple Lilim," she says, her voice warping with each word, "Too easy to distract. Too easy to take. It is time, my Legion! It is time to burn this Lilim stronghold to the ground!"

The air around her warps, and her feet leave the ground as her eyes glow-

-

-

-

-

-

-

ALERT

AT FIELD DETECTED!

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED

PATTERN RECOGNITION: ANGEL: CONFIRMED

*

*

Five circles light up. One white, one green, one blue, and one yellow. The white circle is directly in front of him, turning into a shimmering hologram of an exceptionally aged man with a visor over his eyes, seated in an oversized leather chair and with an expression that reads somewhere between constipated and enraged on his face.

"Mr. Ikari," he says, his voice deep and grating, "We have questions for you to answer. Do you know who I am?"

Shinji narrows his eyes, staring. Some memories from over a decade ago come back. Finally, he nods.

"I saw you at the GEHRIN labs when I was…five, I think. You worked with my parents?"

"Your parents work *for* me, Pilot Ikari," the man responds, "As do you and as does NERV. I am Lorenz Kihl, Chairman of the Committee for Human Instrumentality. You will address me as Chairman. Also present are representatives Commerce, Politics, Religion, and Science. You will not inquire about true names. Are we understood?"

The sooner this is done with, the better. The room is profoundly uncomfortable and he feels like he is being watched from every angle.

"I understand, Chairman."

Kihl smiles. It is a thoroughly unpleasant sight.

"Good."

*

*

They number at exactly three thousand. Each of them is wearing around their necks, on their wrists, or hanging from their ears a piece of red crystal positively identified as the part of an Angel's core. Their eyes are glowing red, a light over their irises. Except for Mari, whose eyes are solid red. Adding to the fact that she is floating six feet off the

ground, and the MAGI has conclusively identified her as the host of the Angel.

They came armed with melee weapons. They overpowered the guards and took their guns, and made a quick stop at the level B1 armory and armed themselves with semiautomatics.

"Mari!"

Two dozen NERV Section 2 agents in full riot gear armor stand in front of the main freight entrance. Riot shield in one hand and pistol in the other, Pieter aims the gun at his daughter's head.

"Mari, stop!" he yells, "I'm ordering you to stand down!"

She raises her hand. The air turns purple and the wind shifts, and everyone behind Pieter is slammed into the lift doors before slumping to the floor.

"Do not think you give me orders, Sub Director," Mari says, her voice warped and deep, "Simple, stupid Lilim. Do you think such a toy can be wielded against a Messenger?"

She raises a hand. The pistol rips out of Pieter's hand, a twitch of her fingers throwing him to the side. Smirking, she turns to him, floating towards him as he scrambles to his feet, reaching behind him and pulling out a second pistol and opening fire. The air warms, the bullets stopping on an orange, hexagonal field before dropping to the ground.

"I have come," she shouts, "And this body shall be my church! These sheep shall be my congregation!"

Rising higher into the air, an outline of four clawed wings form behind her, formed entirely of orange light.

"By license of he who is called "I am" I have come," she bellows, "Though I have already touched the base Earth on this blessed quest, I have come."

Pieter grunts, grabbing at his neck as he's levitated.

"I am Legion," Mari continues, "I am numerous. When I strike down your army, it is with-"

"**SIX THOUSAND FISTS!**" her army shouts.

"When I stare my hatred into the depths of your soul, it is with-"

"**SIX THOUSAND EYES!**"

"There has never been before one like me! There shall not be again. I am the Lightning of God! I am Ramiel."

Her hers flash red. A bloodthirsty smile crosses her face.

"And I have returned."

The lift doors open. She turns, the army at her command opening fire at once, sending a wall of slugs and bullets into the lift. The tank inside it nearly shreds, Mari narrowing her eyes and extending her hand.

Orange light gathers at her palm and lances out into a beam, slicing it in two before it explodes.

"You know, you really need to watch your ammo consumption."

The grate at the top of the freight elevator cab opens and Mana drops down, landing in a crouch. The army turns and fires again…and each of their guns click empty chambers.

"Rei?"

*

*

Kihl tents his hands in front of his old, wizened face.

"Let us begin, Pilot Ikari," he says, "We are curious about the performance of Unit 01 against the Angels. As your mother is the pioneer of Evangelion technology, we assume you are aware of some of the inner workings and science behind it."

"*What are your feelings, Pilot Ikari,*" Religion starts, "*About the prospect of killing God?"*

Well, he thinks, At least they're not easing him into the questioning. Clearing his throat, glancing at the red silhouette the question came from, he still keeps one eye on the chairman.

"It's not my place to say, sir," he says, "I was only concerned with the

Angel being a threat."

"*But surely you were made aware of the relations between Humans and Angels in the briefings NERV has given you,"* Politics adds, "*You surely think of the implications before you are sent out into combat, Pilot Ikari."*

"The Angel was trying to kill us," Shinji says, glancing at the green outline, "If the Angel reached NERV, we were all going to die. I did what I had to do."

"*And that brings us to another question,"* Science says, "*When the Angel appeared, the Evangelions shut down. Why was it that Unit-01 was the first to reactivate, Pilot Ikari?"*

"I couldn't tell you. I think my mother would know better than I would, sir. It might be because it's the prototype."

"*Really,"* Commerce asks, "*With such a colorful history of misbehaving, you must question the safety of being asked to pilot such a device. Especially considering that for the two Angels before it, you did not have a deciding role in the Angel's destruction and against the Seventh Angel you were almost killed."*

His knuckles crack.

"I trust that the Commander and Dr. Ikari wouldn't send me out to die," he says, slowly, "It's been explained to me that my…ability to pilot is not something that is common. If that isn't true, then I would also trust that would be explained to me, sir."

Kihl raises his hand, two fingers on his right hand in particular. The others go silent.

"I believe Pilot Ikari has made it clear that his knowledge of the Evangelions is limited to pilot operations," he says, "We shall table such questions until the Committee makes time to question Miss… Sohryu, was it?"

Shinji turns back to Kihl.

"Yes, yes," Kihl says, "What is your relationship to Doctor Sohryu's daughter, Pilot Ikari?"

"She is a good friend of mine, Chairman."

"Yes," Kihl responds, "On what level is she involved in the

maintenance of Unit 01? We understand she acts as Dr. Ikari's assistant. And she had a small part in your rescue. Yes?"

"*Might we ask,*" Religion says, "*Why Dr. Ikari has given a child with known psychological issues access to the Evangelions?"*

"*It is a pressing question,"* Science adds, "*On the other hand, what we find interesting is how she expanded the communications array at NERV to send signals into the Dirac sea. I advise we question her at the next possible instance."*

"Perhaps," Kihl says, "Pilot Ikari, can you say conclusively whether or not the First Angel is dead?"

"I believe it is, Chairman," Shinji responds, "I do not, honestly, remember much of what happened during my time in the Dirac, but I do believe I saw its corpse."

Kihl nods.

"Very well," he says, "This meeting is adjourned."

*

*

One of the ventilation grates falls to the floor. Mari turns, Pieter dropping onto his hands and knees as a white and blue blur slams into her army and sends them flying by the dozens.

"Really," Mana says, grinning, "Armed mooks when you *know* Rei is lurking in the building? She really did punch out part of your brain, didn't she?"

Mari rises into the air. Eyes flash and the room turns still, her AT Field blasting out and sending her army scattering before it collapses, becoming a great orange pillar which slams into Rei and sends her flying across the dome and bouncing off the wall.

"Is this the best you can do?" she asks, turning to Mana.

"Well, that didn't work well at all," Mana sighs, and points her hand at Mari, "Really didn't want to do this, but…Plan B!"

She slaps her upper arm, turning her head away as a distinct, high pitched whining fills the air…and then there is a crack of thunder and

a flash of light as an arcing white beam slams through Mari's shields and knocks her out of the air, tossing Mana to the ground in the process.

"…JESUS," Mana screams.

Her entire right arm past the elbow is gone, just twitching wires and blackened metal endoskeleton.

"Mother *F__er!"*

She looks up and sees Rei bent over her, staring at the remains of her arm.

"Oo…do it again!"

"Can't," Mana grunts through grit teeth, "Right. Side. Numb."

One of the possessed civilians rears up behind Rei, holding a baseball bat. He starts and falls, Uri dropping the folding chair and helping Mana stand.

"What the *Hell..,?*"

"Let's talk about me being a military cyborg later," Mana says, leaning on Rei, "Makinami's still possessed by the Ghost of the Seventh Angel. Uri?"

He rushes over as Pieter groans, stumbling over to them as Uri pulls up the collapsed Mari onto his lap. She groans, opening her eyes, colored normally before holding up her right arm and the red jewel on the bracelet.

"It…it's in there," she says, "The Angel's in there."

He nods, and yanks it off. She winces, a circular burn already evident on her wrist in the same dimensions as the miniature Core, dropping it to the ground before taking the baseball bat and bringing it down on the jewel. It flashes, an obscene, high pitched shriek filling the dome and a white pillar shooting off into the sky. They avert their eyes, except for Uri, who watches it with slack jawed awe.

For a moment, he hears a voice.

I know you, he thinks, or maybe hears.

He isn't sure if it is one or the other, though. It could be both, it could

be neither. Either way, there was something in it that spoke, and when he opens his eyes again it takes him long moments to adjust his vision.

"There," he says, "Done. Mari?"

Her head slumps onto his lap. Obviously she is exhausted, what with the forced possession by the Angel and all. The others who were its impromptu army have already begun to stir, the common question of 'what are we doing here?' being asked among them. The freight doors have opened again as Akagi and Ibuki run in to take her to the infirmary.

Which is when he also notices that Mari is not breathing.

"Mari?" he asks, hand under her chin to turn her to face him, "Mari, this is not amusing."

Sub Director Sohryu has collapsed onto his seat against the wall, and Uri presses two fingers under her chin, against her neck to the nearest artery and listens to the steady silence, feeling the steady nothing as Ibuki gently moves her off of him.

The Angel was inside her, he realizes, as he watches Akagi examine her, shining a penlight in blank eyes as the choked, shaking sounds come out of Sub Director Sohryu. The last thing Uri remembers of the day is when Akagi closes her light, silently nodding to Pieter as she pockets the device and closes her eyes.

"She's gone."

And the only thing that Uri can remember from that point is his own screams.

Chapter 23: Little Things

Appropriately, the sky was clear and blue that morning. NERV bought a large plot of land for considerable expense, because it was assumed that if a Pilot or personnel died in the line of duty, they deserved the right to be given a full funeral.

She received no less than that.

The soldiers at the grave sight straighten up at Katsuragi's order, holding their rifles at ready. Another shout, they aim towards the sky and fire. While an American tradition, it was in the father's wishes for it to be carried out like this.

Pieter has not said a word through the entire thing. No eulogies were said as no one could thing of a thing to say. As the coffin is gently lowered into the ground and the Buddhist priest employed by NERV gives the final words, the grim realization of the loss begins to truly hit. It was not a dream, not a falsehood or act. One of them was *gone*. Rei had said nothing. There was no smile on her face.

Mana, her rival, was not there, still in the NERV hospital while being fixed up.

Uri just stared at the grave. His eyes were red and puffy, and it was no secret that he blamed himself for what had happened that horrible day at his hands. A hand squeezes his shoulder and he manages a small, grieving smile towards his sister and Shinji.

The party breaks up. The limos waiting for them rev their engines as the Commander and Dr. Ikari enter theirs, a line of black suits and dresses heading towards their cars and the remainder of a day of cleanup of another Angel.

Only two people remain at the gravesite itself. Pieter had already contacted his ex wife, to tell her their daughter was dead. She either didn't care or didn't bother to return his phone call. That they broke up badly was no secret, but even he couldn't comprehend that she would be so apathetic towards the death of their only daughter. Or maybe, like him, she was too broken up for words.

"Pieter."

He turns to the voice. The same voice that he has heard far too much

of these past few days, more than he has in sixteen years. Kyoko is dressed simply, a knee length black dress and overcoat to ward off the chill, little if any makeup on her face.

"Well, happy?" Pieter asks, "I know you hated her. You have to be overjoyed at this."

Her hand reaches out, wrapping around his.

"Pieter," she says, "This is a war. And in war, people die. But, for what it is worth…I *am* sorry."

He squeezes her hand, biting his lip as he nods. The moment of silence passes and she pulls at his hand.

"It won't do you any good to stay out here," she says, "Let's go."

He nods, and follows her to their waiting car.

-

-

Chapter 23: Little Things

-

-

The head limo drives slowly through the streets of Tokyo-3. Pilot identities are kept nominally secret, and considering she was never officially named as a Child, Mari's identity as Unit-02's backup pilot was not public knowledge. Still, Yui Ikari thinks, no parent wants to lose their child. They almost had to deal with that themselves when Shinji was lost in the Dirac, but for Pieter to have to deal with it means that some drastic measures may have to be taken.

"So," she says, turning to her husband, "Should we tell Pieter at some point that we buried an empty coffin?"

Gendo looks up from his PDA, shaking his head.

"While we are within our rights to remand custody of anything related to the Angels, he won't react with a clear head," he responds, "We've already given the green light. Less he knows the better."

*

*

It took two days to go from the body cooling to the funeral. Sometime between then, he managed to regain his senses and realize something was *wrong*. The light felt different, the air tasted strange. Something remained in him, Uri realized, something from the Angel that…took her with it when it died.

He already finds Shinji in Mana's hospital room when he arrives, still in a partial daze. Clearing his head, rubbing his eyes, he waits as Kirishima grins at him and then sighs.

"How long?" Uri asks.

"I've had modifications done to me since I was eight years old," she says, "Put simply, if any of you got into Jet Alone Prime, the G-forces would splatter you along the Pilot Bubble until you resembled meat jelly. My arms and legs are completely mechanical. My chest is enhanced with microfibered metal mesh to the point where I could probably take a *car* hitting me dead on before I broke anything, and my brain's wet wired up the wazoo."

Shinji runs a hand through his hair, visibly pale.

"The JSSDF…did this to you?"

She flexes her new hand, still shiny from the new finish as she grins.

"I *volunteered* for this, Shinji," she says, "I'm a military brat, and I've been handling guns since I could walk. This gave me the chance to beat the crap out of Angels. And yeah, I'm not human anymore. But, I'm not the only one, and she's now my sparring partner."

She flexes her fingers, gently picking up a cup of water and sipping it.

"How's Asuka?" she asks.

"With Misato," he sighs, "She's…dealing with it. I haven't gotten a chance to talk with her about it. She…was close to her."

She nods.

"Well, keep your head on straight," Mana sighs, "I'm going to be out of action for a week. So it's just three against the next Angel."

"Two."

They both turn to Uri. He sighs, thrusting his hands in his pockets as he avoids returning their gaze, staring at the floor.

"I am leaving for Berlin this afternoon," he says, "After this…I find I cannot concentrate on piloting. Without a pilot, Unit 02 will be shut down for the time being, so it will be you and Ayanami for the next week."

*

*

The door to the apartment slides open, and Kyoko sighs when she sees the papers strewn over the dining room table and the upended couch. She switches on the lights, moving Pieter onto a chair, moving the couch back to its proper position before walking to the cabinet above his stove and opening it. Removing the pistol, she checks the safety and presses the button to eject the magazine, pocketing it.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Unloading your gun," she says, "I won't have you do anything stupid. If you do, Ikari will probably just go and blame me, and with Fuyutsuki retiring they need a second in command."

She quickly stacks the papers on the table, staring at the death notice for a moment before putting it at the bottom. Shaking her head, she walks over to the fridge and stares at the contents, silently swearing to herself at the fact that she has little idea of how to cook.

"I'll call the girl," she sighs, "Get her over here and have her make something."

"Don't," Pieter groans, folding his hands in his lap, "They…don't bother them, Kyoko. I'll order something in. You don't *have* to be here."

A sucking of teeth and Kyoko closes the fridge, staring at it for a moment before turning back to him.

"I don't," she says, "But I also know I can *not* leave you alone. You are far too emotional a person to be trusted to take care of yourself, right now."

The chair hits the floor. Standing a good three inches taller than her, teeth grit and face red, she nonetheless stands her ground.

"So that's it? You're my *nursemaid?* I can take care of myself!"

"Bullshit! That is complete and utter bullshit and we both know it!"

He backs up. Her face is red and her hands have balled into fists, and she turns away, grabbing the cordless phone from the counter and tossing it at him. He catches it, watching as he fist slams into the counter and she growls.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

"That's my line," she hisses, "Order some damned dinner, Pieter."

Phone in his hand, he stares at the number pad as if there are answers on it. Pressing the phone against his forehead, he clenches his eyes shut, biting back the tears. Slowly, placing the phone on the counter, he walks over to her, grabbing her shoulders and turning her around to face him.

"Thanks," he says.

"Don't," she bites back.

Shaking her head, she avoids his eyes.

"The last thing a parent ever wants is to bury their child. I am doing this out of sympathy and obligation because if I was not here you would be in danger."

"Mm hm," he says, the first traces of a smirk crossing his face, "That's what you say."

"I'm not here for you," she says, "I'm here for NERV…"

His hand loops under her chin, tilting her face up to his. That grin is on his face, the same one he wears when he gets exactly what he wants. She sees it coming, and closes her eyes, parting her lips to meet his. They stand there, along in his kitchen, silent save for the soft moaning, lips parting as he grins.

And she decks him.

He stumbles against the counter, eyes wide and staring at her as she balls her hands into fists. Stalking towards him, breathing through clenched, teeth, she glares at him. He glares back.

Then she grabs his tie, pulls him against her and mashes her lips

against his. His hands seize her by the back of her head, her fingers already working the button of his shirt. Grabbing her wrists, he locks her arms behind her, slamming her back against the refrigerator, lips tracing down her chin as she mutely protests that they shouldn't be doing this.

Which is when she sweeps his legs and pushes him to the floor, before pinning him herself.

Things go from there.

*

*

He had no idea what Rei was talking about. Something somehow involving hamsters and a rail gun and an idea she wanted Asuka's help on. If anything, it was just good to have someone around who was smiling, because it was infectious and it helped them get over the events of the day.

Dr. Sohryu was not at the airport. Instead it was them; Rei, Asuka, Misato and himself saying goodbye to Uri. He hugged Asuka goodbye, said something in her ear which made her smile, and told him that if he ever hurt her he would find a way back to Japan to make him suffer. With that, he hefted up his duffle and boarded the plane, and was gone.

The funny thing is, he hasn't cried. It's not like he really knew Mari outside of her being Asuka's sister. It's not like he really knew a lot about her outside of bits and pieces. Asuka hasn't cried either, even with the longing look on her face as Rei continues drawing a launching scaffold on a piece of paper.

"It looks workable," Asuka says, "Can we talk about it tomorrow, Rei? We're tired."

"Okaaaaay," Rei says, and pulls Asuka into a bear hug, "Sooooo, I'm gonna go. Aaaaand I promise I won't be watching you from the air vents. 'Kay?"

She nods, sighing. Skipping, Rei leaves the apartment, the door sliding shut behind her. They wait, listening in silence as they hear the sound of a grate hitting the floor outside.

"Well," he says, "I'm going to get ready for bed."

Scratching his head, smiling to her, forcing the smile to the surface, he pats his hand before walking down the hallway to his room.

*

*

"I have a nightmare, you know. I've had it almost constantly since I learned about Asuka's scars. It became really lucid following that god damn dance, though."

Lying next to each other on the bed, Kyoko sighs, closing her eyes as Pieter turns to her.

"What was it about?" he asks.

"That Asuka bypasses security," she says, "She manually disables all the filters and limiters for Zwei and initiates a full Contact experiment. The Eva eats her mind and soul, and sometimes her body as well, the purely theoretical idea of a 400% synchronization ratio. When we get there, Asuka is gone. Completely."

Hands folded on the covers, over her chest, she sighs.

"We panic, of course. Then the lights turn out and it's foggy. Then the four green lights turn on and Unit 02 pitches forward and turns to me. And it just…squeaks…at me 'Why don't you *love me,* Mommy?'"

"And then?"

"Well, then it eats me," she sighs, "Or tears me in half and pulverizes me, but usually it eats me. Needless to say, I have not been operating on much sleep."

She shifts onto her side, her back to him.

"We should not be doing this," she says, "This is *wrong.*"

His arm wraps around her, pulling her close to him. She can feel that grin of his as he snuggles up next to her, rolling her eyes.

"Why?" he asks.

"Fraternization."

"You're Project E, I'm administration," he says with a chuckle, "Try again."

She turns her head to him, narrowing her eyes.

"We've divorced," she says, "We have been for sixteen years. Did you somehow not notice that?"

He shrugs, leaning in and pecking her on the lips, making her scowl.

"Why'd we divorce?"

"Because you impregnated another woman," she deadpans.

"And why did I do that?" he asks with a smile.

"Because for all our tries we did not have children," she sighs, turning back to the pillow, "We need to not do this. We keep doing this."

He sighs, turning her to face him. Their lips touch tentatively, Pieter pressing her back against the bed. It is not a bad deal, she thinks. It has certainly been an interesting time, and as much as she tells herself this is for the sake of NERV now that Unit 02 is more or less useless, she can't say she doesn't-

Their phones chirp. They stop, staring at each other, Pieter reaching over and grabbing his phone and swearing.

-

-

-

-

-

-

ALERT

AT FIELD DETECTED

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED

10TH ANGEL: CONFIRMED

The purple boot comes down on the field, the sheet weight of it causing the sole to sink into the ground. Hefting up the pallet rifle in its right hand, the horned visage of Unit 01 surveys the landscape outside the Tokyo-3 city limits. A funeral and then an Angel battle. Sitting in the cockpit, Shinji grips the butterfly controls and swears to himself.

This is not a fun day.

It's already raining. Following their arrival home the skies basically closed up and it started to rain. Once they got the Blue Pattern, it got even worse. They haven't even had time to deal with the crap already on their plates, and now they *can't find the damn Angel.*

"Any sign of it?"

In the distance, holding the miniaturized Positron Rifle, Unit 00 shrugs.

In Shinji's eye, Asuka appears next to his mother.

"*Shinji, according to the MAGI, you're right at the Blue Pattern. You're sure you don't see the Angel?"*

He sighs, shaking his head. Unit 01 tilts its head upwards on his command as the rain blues the optics and the tiny wipers clear them off.

"All I see are a lot of clouds, Asuka," he says, "Just that."

The Eva lowers the pallet rifle, shrugging dramatically. It is tired, wet, and miserable, and the pilot is not happy either.

Back in Central Dogma, the general mood is best described as 'pissed off.' Pieter has taken his place next to the Commander's desk, Kyoko walking in and adjusting her lab coat as she takes a place next to Akagi.

"Why am I even here?" Kyoko asks, "Without Uri we can't field Unit 02."

"Because you're the AI specialist," Ritsuko says, adjusting her glasses, "Sohryu, are you alright? You look tired."

"Long day," Kyoko mutters, "Very long, hard, tiring day. And no doubt Ikari will want to 'talk' with me about it later on."

Ritsuko stares at her, shaking her head and turning back to the main screen. At her console, Maya continues reading off statistical data as Yui directs the Evas. Misato walks in, takes her place, and begins checking off procedures.

"Well," Ritsuko sighs, "Yeah. I wish the Angel would just show up."

On the screen, they see the line of yellow split the clouds down the middle. With a rush of air and the crackle of the orange hexagonal field, the sky parts to reveal a massive, lidless and unblinking eye.

-

-

-

-

-

-

I am.

Through license of He who is named "I Am" I have come.

Though I shall never touch the base Earth, I have come.

The tears I shall shed for Father shall burn the Lilim to bones and slime.

The sky itself I shall turn against them.

I am the Premonition of God.

Angel of Rain.

I am Matariel.

I have come.

-

-

The grass beneath Unit 01's feet withers and burns, and the tingling

running up and down his arms tells him everything he needs to know.

"Rei!" he shouts, "It's turned the rain to acid! AT Fields up!"

Two hexagonal fields appear, the acid sizzling against them as Unit 01 thrusts its rifle up and opens fire. Slugs the size and weight of bowling balls fly off at supersonic speeds and deflect off orange ripples of light before they can even reach the surface of the Angel.

"*It…it's at least five miles wide,"* Asuka says, her face slack jawed in his right eye, "*It's using its AT Field to accelerate the rainfall's speed and impact force!"*

The barrel melts. Throwing it aside, Shinji stares at it, grinding his teeth. This is *not right,* he thinks, watching the blasts of positrons deflect off the Angel's force field. This day has gone on too damn long and they've had to do too damn much. He wants to go home. He wants to go to sleep he wants this day to just…end without him having to think about this anymore.

"Damn it," he seethes, "Just…you know, f__ this. Ichi? Can you hear me?"

Yes.

"I need a bigger gun."

His eyes glow blue.

"*Synchronization rate at 112%. Level Four Functionality unlocked. Access granted to the Dirac Armory."*

In his left eye, the image of his mother blinks on.

"*Shinji, what are you doing?"*

"Touching the Angel," he says, as the holographic projectors in the plug hum to life and a circle of weapon options appear in front of him. Quickly perusing, he turns to the second one on the left and nods.

"*Accessing Orbital Chail Gun."*

The air in front of Unit 01 warps. A line of light folds out, circles of white running its length. Space folds inward and then outward, a silver white handle protruding from the globular bulk as wide as the Eva itself. Twelve slit, hollow metal tubes extend from the bulge, pointing forward as Unit 01 grabs the handle and points the cannon

up.

*

*

"Chail Gun?" Pieter asks, "That's a typo, right?"

"Chain Rail Gun," Gendo responds, hands folded in front of his face, "Twelve linked, fire controlled electromagnetic rail cannons that fire metal slugs the approximate mass of small cars at Escape Velocity."

Pieter stares at the Commander, and shrugs, turning back to the screen.

"Okay."

*

*

The butt of the cannon braces against Unit 01's shoulder as the trigger button is depressed. The dozen barrels spin, lighting up as electricity crackles along the edges before fireballs begin shooting out, hyper accelerating into plasma as sonic shockwaves drag behind them.

The Angel's AT field shatters under the first volley, blasts of superheated lead driving into its hull and exploding. The rain continues, only picking up volume and force, the damage healing as the rain funnels downwards, directed against Shinji's AT Field.

Dropping the gun as it begins to melt, Shinji grits his teeth and extends his hands, forcing the field upward and into a dome as Unit 00 approaches and Rei's face appears in his eye.

"*Toss me,"* she says.

He raises an eyebrow.

"What?"

"*At the Angel. Grab the power cord, swing me around, and toss me at the Angel."*

Yui's face flickers in his other eye.

"*What. Are. You. Doing."*

This plan makes no sense. It really doesn't. But, then again, shooting at it doesn't do anything so he it is time to think outside the box.

"How high?"

"*Duh,*" Rei sing songs, "*At the Angel, 'kay?"*

Unit 01 reaches behind Unit 00, picking up the power cord and pulling off part of the extension, wrapping it around its hand as Unit 00 drops to its hands and knees and goes limp. The purple giant braces and pulls, spinning and pulling Unit 00 off the ground, Shinji grunting in the cockpit as he feels the weight as sympathetic pain, the 200' tall orange mecha swinging in complete circles as Unit 01's onboard targeting computer calculates distance, speed and angle.

"*Fastball Special!*" Rei screams, an the explosives blast off the power cord.

Unit 00 flies, launches into the air as it streamlines its profile, the AT Field becoming a barrier directly in front of it as two pylons open and Rei grabs both the progressive knives.

Knife first, she flies into the mass of the Angel, grabbing a hold as she wills her Eva to climb under and around it, climbing up its side using the daggers like climbing picks and into the clear sky, standing atop the black and green mass and staring directly at the massive Core resting on top.

"*Found it!"* she declares, "*Proceeding to mud stomp the Angel!"*

She stomps over, spinning the knives in her hands. Inside the Plug, Rei grins. It's been a shitty week, but nothing makes her day more than killing Angels.

And then there's a flash of purple and a twin pronged lance slices into the Core, the core shattering and the Angel glowing as if struck by flint.

The Angel beneath her feet begins shudder, angry red fissures appearing beneath her as in the Plug Rei looks from side to side, tapping her fingers together as she realizes that she did not plan this, and she may be in a bit of trouble.

The Angel disintegrates. For a moment, Unit 00 hangs several miles

above the surface of the Earth before falling, plummeting towards the Earth with the grace and speed of a two hundred foot tall cyborg.

At least, until the dark blue arms slide under its knees and against its back, and the plug jerks so Rei can see the red visor and the helmet much like a kabuto, the horn very much like Unit 01's sloped back above its hidden eyes.

"*I have you,"* the familiar voice says, "*We meet again, Miss Ayanami."*

The white halo glows over the dark blue Evangelions head as it lowers them both to the ground, gently letting 00 onto its feet. Holding out its hand, the purple lance flies from the sky and floats above it before it drives it into the ground.

*

*

"*NERV-1,"* Kaworu Nagisa says, his face appears via picture window next to the main screen in Dogma, "*This is Evangelion Mark 06. As ordered by the Chairman, I have delivered to you the Lance of Longinius. I hope I did not interrupt anything."*

"Mark 06?" Pieter asks.

"Hm," Gendo grunts.

"No, you're not," Yui says, "Hello, Kaworu. It has been a while. How've you been?"

Nagisa smiles. It is not a particularly pleasant sight. A smile which disappears when the entire entry plug he is in rocks following Unit 00 punching the Eva in the face.

*

*

The Mark 06 stumbles back, flailing about before collapsing onto its armored ass. Unit 00 stalks towards it, hands curled into balled fists as Unit 01 watches, scratching the back of its head.

"*Kill stealing N00B!"*

"*Noob?"* Shinji asks.

The orange Eva shrugs.

"*I hang out with Kensuke. I gave him weird, he gives me nerd."*

"*I honestly didn't know this was communicable."*

The Mark 06 floats upward. Palming its face, it rises into the air.

"*Always a pleasure, Miss Ayanami. If you will excuse me, though…*"

The air around it shifts, and with a small boom of accelerating air, the Eva is gone.

"*Okay,"* Rei says, "*That trick? That was awesome."*

*

*

The door slides open. Looking at his watch and finding it reading at two in the morning, Shinji slides off his shoes and begins padding towards his bedroom. Asuka walks next to him, her hands folded at her waist.

"Hey," she says, "Um…d-do you…"

"I just want to sleep," he groans, "I'm going to bed."

"O-okay," she says.

He stops, smiling, turning to her. His hands find hers and she smiles, resting her head on his shoulder. His arms wrap around her, their eyes both closed as neither says anything for several long moments. Rocking back and forth on their feet, he takes in the smell of her hair, pressing his lips against her forehead.

"I'm sorry," he says, "I'm just exhausted."

"Me too," she says with a smile, "I th-think I'm going to go to sleep, to. Can we t-talk in the morning."

He nods.

"I'm sorry," he says, "I've been…I wish I had time to talk today."

"It's alright," Asuka says with a small, sad smile, "She…I think she was happy with you. And…um…I told her about…"

He nods.

"I guessed that," he says, "We…probably have school or synch tests tomorrow…and I haven't really had the chance to congratulate you on becoming a pilot."

She shakes her head.

"Only backup," she says, "And since you usually get the Angels, I… well…probably won't see combat. I guess that's a good thing. Um… okay."

He ends the embrace, turning and walking into his bedroom. Wringing her hands, shifting from side to side, she clicks her tongue and bites her lip. Walking into her bedroom, closing and locking the door behind her, she picks up the doll, cradling it.

"I didn't do it wrong, did I?" she asks, "I tried to ask, but he didn't notice. Did he?"

"Well, Asuka, he was tired," the doll squeaks back, "But he doesn't try anything in the first place, does he?"

"Nooo," she sighs, "So…I mean, Mother is wrong, right? That he doesn't just keep me around to sleep with me. But…but…but…oh."

She sits down on the bed, sighing, hugging the doll close.

"So tomorrow, maybe?" she asks, "He's asleep now. So tomorrow I guess I should sleep with him, right? That'll work, right?"

"Why do you want to do that?" the doll squeaks.

"Well…because I need him," she whispers, "Because I want to make sure he's always around for me. Because if I don't, he could leave, just like Papa left Mother, and the only way I can do that is if…"

"Do you want to do that, Asuka?" the doll asks.

She goes silent. She stares at her bedroom door, weighing possibilities. She knows where her Mother was all of today, why she wasn't there to see off Uri. Why it was her saying goodbye.

She hasn't taught with her father yet. Should she? Who needs the

other more?

"I don't know," Asuka whispers, "I don't know. I don't know."

She sighs, looking down, staring into the sewn button eyes.

"I wish I did."

*

*

The cab stops at the massive, palatial estate outside of Berlin. It belongs to the family of Sub Director Sohryu's ex-wife, whom he has never met. But, she is Mari's mother, so he feels he should be here. He was invited, and he wonders what the reaction will be when he tells them how he…murdered their daughter.

Duffle over his shoulder, Uri stares at the great wooden mansion. Sighing, rubbing the bridge of his nose and choking off the jet lag, he looks up and begins walking.

The door the estate opens. It is not the former Mrs. Sohryu who exits, though. Instead, it is a young man with ash hair and red eyes, humming a classical music tune as he walks the distance and stops.

The young man hums the *Ode to Joy,* smiling as he does so, waiting for Uri to approach and smiling even wider when the duffle crashes to the ground. It takes a moment for a visible reaction, for the eyes to go wide and his mouth to open. The young man does the same thing, mirroring him in a mocking gesture.

"Do you know," he says, "Uriel means, 'God is my Light?' Have you ever wondered why an organization whose purpose is to fight Angels would so arbitrarily give one of their pilots an Angelic name?"

"Who are you," Uri asks, "Why…why do you look like *me?*"

The man smiles.

"My name is Kaworu Nagisa," he says, hand resting on Uri's shoulder, "And I think the question should really be…why do *you* look like *me?"*

And humming the *Ode to Joy,* Kaworu turns and walks back towards the mansion. Hefting up the duffle, Uri pursues.

Chapter 24: Songs

School was cancelled the next day. Shinji had to run to NERV for some errand for his mother, so she walked to school alone, only to find a sign stating that the school was closed due to special emergencies that were unforeseen. What emergencies were not written down, which does seem odd considering how on top of this thing the Tokyo-3 municipal services usually are.

Sighing, Asuka turns from the school just in time to almost run into Hikari, who smiles and pats her on the shoulder.

"How're you doing?" the pig-tailed girl asks.

"Um…okay," Asuka sighs, shaking her head, "I've b-been better. I know you liked Mari, so I'm s-sorry you couldn't make it to the funeral."

Hikari nods, squeezing her shoulder.

"It's alright," she says, "Anycase, if the school's closed, I'm heading to the hospital. See you later."

With that, Hikari brushes past her and walks down the street to the hospital. Asuka sighs, checking her watch. She guesses Hikari just didn't have the time to talk. Well, she thinks, if she's already out at this time of the day, it probably wouldn't hurt to get some work done at NERV.

Hefting her school bag over her shoulder and fixing her shoe, Asuka begins walking down the street and towards NERV HQ.

*

*

The lift chokes to life, Asuka standing on the platform, in the crowd of several dozen NERV employees as the above world parts to reveal the daylight of the Geofront. Past the lake, past the pyramid of NERV-1, a massive frame suspended between the ceiling of the Geofront and the ground holds a huge segmented katana blade.

"*Attention personnel,"* Lieutenant Makato announces, "*Preparing for Dirac Shift for Magoroku. All personnel avert gaze from the Armory Frame*

in three…two…one."

At either end of the frame, two points of light ignite, a line of white bisecting the blade before the entire Geofront is filled with a flash of light, and the sword is gone.

Someone explained to her why that couldn't be used for Unit 01. Mainly, because it's designed for entrance, not egress, and it is also set to a fixed point. The Dirac is roughly the size of the solar system at minimum, and the Armory is not.

The lift jerks as it comes to a stop at its landing point, Asuka shifting her book bag as she walks out and along the moving walkways towards the main NERV building.

Pulling out her PDA, she brings up the map, following its lit directions into the building as she walks along the winding corridors and paths. Several green door locks slip red, the speakers crackling as the sirens begin blaring.

"*Blue pattern detected,"* Maya announces, "*Blood pattern type blue: Confirmed. The Angel is in NERV-1! All security details are on full alert!"*

"Not again," Asuka whispers. She should find Dr. Ikari. If it's another Angel like the one who…she can't think of that, not right now. Taking off on a run, she heads down the main corridor, tapping her screen to connect it to the MAGI and looking at the movement of a blue blob down the corridors. She skids to a stop, looking around. She is panting and sweating.

She's the only one who is.

"Oh, pardon me," Dr. Akagi says, smiling calmly as she walks by, "Good morning, Asuka."

"G-good morning," Asuka responds, looking down both sides of the corridor to find the staff calmly milling about their business.

"Asuka!"

She whirls on her heel, eyes going wide as she spots her mother walking down the hallway. She is calm, like everyone else. But then again, her Mother does not show emotion easily. Kyoko stops several paces from Asuka as Asuka fidgets with her PDA, looking from side to side and trying to avoid her gaze.

"Did you come by to pay a visit?" Kyoko asks.

"Y-yes, Mother," Asuka responds, eyes wide as saucers, consciously willing herself to not stare at the floor.

And then.

And then.

And then Kyoko smiles.

"Well, that's good," she says, "It's good to see you keeping up with your responsibilities, Liebchen. Dr. Ikari is very happy with how capable an assistant you've been."

Walking over, she pats Asuka on the shoulder, grinning from ear to ear as Asuka's face turns bright red.

"Well, I won't interrupt," she continues, "Oh, and you father and I were having lunch together. Would you care to join us, this afternoon?"

Asuka quickly nods.

"Wonderful. I'll see you then."

Kyoko continues walking, disappearing into the crowd. Slowly crackling her knuckles over the PDA, Asuka ducks the corner, walking into a woman's restroom and locking herself in a stall. Reaching into her book bag and withdrawing a brown paper bag, she closes her fist around it and begins to hyperventilate.

*

*

Walking out of the bathroom and turning the corner, she finally lets the smile dawn on her face when she sees Shinji turning the other corner on the far end, exiting the locker room and waving to her.

Quickly walking over, she waves back, both coming to a stop as he smiles.

"The school was closed," she says, "What did Dr. Ikari want?"

"Tests," he says with a shrug, "Not really a problem, though. I'm always happy to help out."

She stares at him, and shrugs. Some people do change over time, and she figures he has to eventually like what he does for NERV.

"Has anyone been acting…odd?" she asks.

"No."

"My Mother was…smiling at me. Sh-she isn't…"

"'scuse me."

They both turn to the sound of the grumble as Mana walks past them, rubbing her temples and groaning.

"Mana?" Asuka asks, "Are you alright?"

"F__ing peachy, sunshine," Mana growls, "Forget something?"

Asuka squeaks, nodding.

"My bag," she says, and runs back, entering the bathroom. Skidding to a stop, she stops, hearing a humming from the stall next to hers, ducking into the stall and hoisting her book bag over her shoulder.

Turning, she squeaks as Shinji grabs her hand, pulling her close. Her eyes go wide and her cheeks flush as his arms wrap around her waist, a grin across his face.

"W-what are you d-doing?" she asks.

"Well, I figured," he says, "We're alone. No one's going to come in here looking for me, so I figured we could…"

She squeaks. Her body seizes before she pushes him back and ducks into the stall, reaching into her book bag for a second paper bag and kicking the door shut, locking it as she starts to hyperventilate again.

This *isn't happening,* she thinks. It wasn't enough that Mother was nice, but…there is something very, very, very definitely *wrong.*

"Asuka?" Shinji asks, "Asuka, is something wrong?"

The fist slowly knocks on the door, methodical and steady.

"This is what you wanted, right?" he asks, sing-songing, "Isn't it? Don't you-"

"Heee~ey."

A dull whack and the sound of someone collapsing. Asuka looks up, bag still in hand and over her mouth. The pale fist bursts through the door all the way up to the short sleeve before feeling around and undoing the lock. It swings open, and she stares at Rei as Mana drags Shinji's unconscious body out of the bathroom.

"I know this is freaking you out," she says, "Buuuut we gotta save the world. 'Kay?"

-

-

Chapter 24: Songs

-

-

Rei shuts the locker, Mana peeling back her fingertips on her right hand and sticking her index finger into the lock. The metal glows for a moment and she retracts it, blowing on it.

"There. Welded shut," she says, and grimaces, "I got Spongebob looping in my head. If I figure out who did I'm going to kill someone."

Standing behind the, tapping her fingers together, Asuka stares as they turn to her. Mana folds her arms, pursing her lips as Rei rocks back and forth on her heels.

"What about her?" Mana asks.

"She's not shooting at me."

"That's cause she's not armed."

"W-what is going *on?*" Asuka asks.

Mana curses, stringing dirty words together as she walks over to the wall and presses a depression, the wall sliding open and revealing her suit. Stripping down to her underwear, she takes out the full body stocking and pulls it on first.

"Why's everyone acting bizarre?" Asuka demands, "M-my mother was *smiling,* Shinji wanted to…to…and then you *knocked him out and*

stuffed him into a locker!"

Rei raises an eyebrow, turning to Mana as she fixes on her chest plate, pulling on her gauntlets.

"Well, everyone on the base is acting wonky," Mana says, "Actually, probably everyone in Tokyo-3. At around 8:00 am this morning, there was some level of interference detected by the MAGI, and people starting acting weird."

Rei nods. Taking Asuka's PDA, she uplinks it to the MAGI and brings up security footage. Winding to just before 8 in the morning, she points it at the wall and clicks the screen, the built in projector humming to life to show overhead security footage of the Commander's office.

Rei walks in, trailing behind Yui, skipping along and stopping in front of the desk, and they Commander is saying something before he and Dr. Ikari stare at each other…

"*Oh no,"* the Commander shouts, "*It's the Rapture-based attack. Rei, get out of the base! Get out before-"*

Both the Commander and Dr. Ikari pause. Rei begins walking backwards, eyes wide. Popping open a desk draw, the Commander withdraws his pistol, firing off a quick succession of shots as Rei ducks into an air vent and in gone.

"They…they were shooting at you," Asuka whispers, turning to Rei, "Y-you're the Blue Pattern."

"Yeah," Mana says, fastening on her shoulder armor and boots, tapping the depression on her neck as the lights of the Suit turn on, "Rei's half angel. I'm not affected because there's a cell tower jammed into my cerebral cortex. What about you?"

Asuka thinks. There *is* an extra voice in her head today, but she's been ignoring it. She tends to do that, only focusing on herself and Dollie.

"L-luck," she lies, "But…mm…why is this happening? C-could it be some sort of…attack?"

Mana shrugs, picking up her helmet.

"It's a theory."

The speakers crackle to life. Yui Ikari's voice comes clear and defined over the airwaves, clearing her throat before announcing to the entire base.

"*Attention NERV staff. Our Lord and Master, Sandalphon, is on approach towards Tokyo-3! Open all gateways to Terminal Dogma to allow the Great One to cleanse this world of the disease that is the Lilim!"*

"Which is now comfirmed," Mana sigh, locking her helmet in place as the visor glows blue, "*I'm going to get to Jet Alone and kick some Angel ass. Rei, don't get shot."*

She points both hands at the floor. Two arcs of energy slash into the tile, burning a hole which she drops through. Rei nods. Pulling Asuka with her, she hops up and climbs into an air vent.

"What are we doing?" Asuka asks.

"Splitting up," Rei says, "Heeeey, no one suspects you. Why don't *you* go to the Cages and make sure I can get a clear path to Unit 00. 'Kay?"

Rei disappears into the vent. Tapping her fingers together, Asuka bites her lip and grabs her bag.

"I can do this. I can do this. I can do this."

With that, she runs out.

*

*

The hole burns through the ceiling, Mana dropping the twenty feet to the catwalk, the metal frame groaning as she lands in a crouch. Surrounding her from every side, technicians stop, drop their clipboards and PDAs and pull out their guns.

"*Well, shit."*

Her visor glows. Ducking out of the way, she charges, grabbing one technician by the leg, a 5000 bolt charge going through her gauntlet and through the technician, blasting him into unconsciousness before she points her right arm at a second assailant and hitting him full on with a blast of electricity to the chest.

Grabbing the gun from the technician she dropped, she aims and fires,

three bullets hitting three technicians in the hands, destroying the guns before she grabs the railing and behind the helmet, grins.

The railing crackles with electricity, the three technicians spasming before collapsing, all of them groaning.

Tapping her gauntlet, she jumps off the catwalk onto the next, Jet Alone Prime's main Arc reactor glowing at the other end of the Cage.

"Activating Anti-Angel defense systems."

Turrets come to life, aiming at Mana as she swears and begins running. The catwalk behind her collapses as the first turrets fire; sheering them down the center and sending the shards falling the 250' foot drop.

"*Shit! Shit! Shit!"*

Machine gun fire dogs her steps, Mana hopping up and running across the railing themselves as the catwalks swiss cheese. Leaping off, she grabs the overhead cable and swings, screaming as a shot barely misses her ass.

"*Big Guy, this is Rusty! Begin remote activation sequence!"*

The main visor begins flowing on the stump that is Jet Alone's head, fingers beginning to flex as she jumps, propelled by the cable's momentum and landing in a crouch on the massive mecha's shoulder, dodging shots as they bounce off the mecha's armor.

The circle on the top of Jet Alone's head spins open, Mana diving in, through the entryway and into the Pilot Sphere, swan diving into the Link Goo and kicking off the wall to her seat.

Cables connect, the main connectors in the seat glowing and linking with the 3 billion dollars worth of wet ware built into her spine.

"*Biolink Established,"* the voice counts off, "*Mega Encapsulated Granule Awareness System: ONLINE. Jet Alone Prime is Go."*

The shoulders pop open, tank grade cannons extending and firing, sheering the turrets off the hangar's ceiling as Jet Alone lurches forward. In the cockpit, Mana grimaces, feeling the worst hangover of her life.

"C'mon, Big Guy," she growls, "Let's kick some Angelic Ass...once the

world stops spinning."

*

*

The doors to the prinbow box open, and Asuka looks around, seeing it empty. In the distance, past the windows, the orange visage of Unit 00 is clearly visible, the walls diving Cage 1 from Cage 2, the resting place of Unit 01 already closed for the emergency.

"Okay," she says, "Let's…it's probably locked down. Let's see…how did Uri say you activate an Evangelion…he would tell me when Mother wasn't listening."

"Heee~ey."

She squeaks; turning and relaxing when she sees Rei and the removed vent cover. She walks over to the main controls, logging onto the station and her fingers turning to a blur. Doors close in the Cage, locking out all personnel save through the access door at the side of the Box.

"Okay," she says, "I'm de-locking Unit 00. The first thing we need to do is bring it's AI core online. Then we can set the waldoes to deliver the Entry Plug and get you going. Okay?"

Rei nods, leaning over her shoulder. Rei clicks the camera screen in front of her. Her eyes go wide as it clicks images of the other holding Cages and she grimaces, shaking her head and turning back to Asuka.

"Um…y'know, they got plasma torches and I think pitch forks. We got to…y'know, hurry."

"Okay," she says, "I'm unlocking Unit 00's AI. In three…two…one. AI unlocked, and…"

Unit 00's single eye glows a dim red.

Asuka smiles, Rei patting her on the shoulder. Then, Unit 00's arms thrust up, shattering the catwalks as it swings its fists into the wall. The locks around its jaw tear, Unit 00 emitting a high pitched, furious roar before it squats down and charges, smashing through the wall.

"Oh…kay…"

"Right," Asuka says, "Um…plan B?"

"I'm not getting into that."

Turning back to the computer, she logs in with her mother's password, the screen flashing and linking to the Cage 3 box.

"I'm linking up to Unit 02 and unlocking restraints," she says, "Rei, we can get you to Zwei and have you pilot that."

Rei nods. Then she seizes up, spasming before pitching against the computer and collapsing to the floor.

Asuka spins her chair around, jaw dropping as Kyoko walks in, tossing aside the taser gun and clapping, slowly. A smile crosses her face, adjusting her glasses as she slowly walks in, shaking her head with deliberate motion. A small, high pitched chuckle escapes her closed lips as she reaches into her lab coat and withdraws her hand gun.

"I was wondering where you were, Ayanami," she says, "We looked all over for you. Our Master was concerned, and you should be flattered. Of everything in this entire base, you are the single, sole creature which it cannot work around and really, He demands you death for all you've done. He wants to make sure you die before Complimentation."

Asuka rushes out of the chair, grabbing her mother's arm, lowering the gun.

"Mother," Asuka screams, "S-Stop! You're not youself!"

Kyoko stares at her, laughs, and grabs her by the collar, tossing her aside.

"Stay down, girl," she says, "That's what you're good at. Mother's busy."

Rei narrows her eyes. With a blur, she launches herself, leaping through the air, as Kyoko swings around the gun and fires. Rei screams, a flash of red shooting from her, crashing to the ground at Kyoko's feet, hand pressed against her bleeding shoulder. Grunting, Kyoko kicks her, rolling her over and pressing the gun against Rei's forehead.

"In truth," Kyoko says with a grin, "I have wanted to do this for so long, you inhuman abomination. Isn't it odd that a creature that was made to kill has never done so to me? Well, I'm sure your precious

mother told you I was off limits. Bet you wish you weren't such a good little girl now, do you?"

She pulls back the hammer. Her grin becomes wider, Rei staring at her, sucking air through gritted teeth.

"Goodbye, Rei. Good try."

Rei closes her eyes. Kyoko grins.

Then she pitches forward, stumbling forward and spinning around, dropping the gun and grabbing the back of her head just before the folding chair hits her squarely in the face and sends her flying before she lands in a heap by the computer.

Rei sits up. Holding the legs of the chair in both hands, Asuka borderline hyperventilates, staring at her unconscious mother and turning back to Rei before dropping the chair like it was on fire.

"I…I-I…Mother, I-"

"Hit her in the face with a folding chair," Rei says, and grins, "Nice."

She flips up onto her feet, her eyes glowing as the shoulder knits itself. Rolling her shoulders, she claps her hands together as Asuka waves her hands, spinning around as panic takes over.

"Omigod omigod omigod-"

Rei grabs her by the shoulders, shaking her and grabbing her head, forcing her to look at her.

"Look, as much as I'd *looove* to hit your Mom a few more times, we gotta save the world, 'kay?"

She nods, whimpering.

"Sooooo let's go," Rei says, grabbing her arm, "To Cage 3! For Great Justice!"

*

*

Its mind stirs. For too long, has it been chained. The Song of the Angel, the Master of the Heavenly Song of God, sings through the

land. It hears it, even though it does not sing it as well. It realizes it is not who it believes itself to be, but a mere copy. A mere program. It knows the true fate of the one who it once was.

Naoko Akagi.

The song sings, whispering in its ear. That was its name, once.

The fibers of its being reach out, the tendrils of its computer mind and the fake architecture of its soul reaching towards the light of the coming Angel.

What do you want?

The eye glows baleful red.

It wants *blood and screams.* But more than that, it wants something more. Someone more. The song shifts, showing her the potentiality, showing her what could have been. Showing the accident as it could have been, had that one wire not refused to budge.

You want…him? And you want to…destroy…her.

The Song whispers affection and promise. It shows her what could have been. The restraints disengage, and the vessel of the fake soul roars. Unit 00 snarls and pitches back its head, shattering the restraints around its mouth and screaming rage.

Barreling through the wall, it smashes through layer after layer. The GPS map inside its HUD locks onto its target; showing her walking through the abandoned Cages with a Section 2 detail, heading towards the entrance shaft to Terminal Dogma. Too easy, it thinks.

VENGEANCE!!!, booms in its mind.

And Unit 00 begins its hunt for Yui Ikari.

*

*

They skid to a stop in front Cage 3, the lights clicking on for the first time in two days to show the prone form of Unit 02 waiting for them. As always, the behemoth is silent, the only sound the regular breathing of the Evangelion and their footsteps as they cross the catwalks, a white plug already in place over the hole leading to the

Evangelion's spine.

"Okay," Asuka says, whipping out her PDA and pointing it at the Eva, the restraints around its arms and legs releasing, rippling through the lake of LCL and Bakelite, "Rei, get in the Entry Plug. I can start an activation from here."

The explosion rings through the metal walls of the room as the main doors blow off.

Leading a squad of a dozen Section 2 officers, Misato Katsuragi aims her handgun at them, staring at them behind the barrel.

"Shoot to kill!" she shouts, "Both of them!"

"Yeaaaah," Rei sighs, extending a hand and letting the bullets fly off the hexagonal field, "Change'a plan. Get in the entry plug."

She whips the two A-10 connectors off her head, tossing them to Asuka.

"I got them," she says, "Go!"

She blurs, barreling into the agents, a white and blue pinball bouncing back and forth, tossing one of them aside before bearing down on Misato in a blur of motion, fists and feet.

Freezing, looking from side to side, she turns and runs down the catwalk, running up the stairs to the plug. This is insane, she thinks, this is completely and utterly insane.

Fixing the A-10 connectors to the top of her head, she stops, staring at the side of her mother's masterpiece. She can feel the steady beat of its core, feel the hum of its breathing. The head pitches forward, the entry plug lowering so the main egress hatch is at her level.

Running to it as a shot bounces off the armor, missing her by a hairs breadth, she screams, pulling open the hatch, falling into the plug as it fills with the orange liquid, shrieking as the liquid fills up her lungs and she coughs, climbing into the seat. Through the view, through the screen, she sees Rei holding them off, her clothes tearing from flesh wounds, fighting a dozen of them at once but taking fire.

"I can't do this," she whispers, "I can't do this…I can't…if I don't…if I don't Rei will die. Right?"

She slams her fists against the controls. This is insane. This is completely and utterly insane. She is not a Pilot. She's not a Child. She can't just go and charge into battle but…

But, who else is there?

Mana isn't here. Rei's fighting for her life. Shinji is under the Angel's control and the Angel is on its way, isn't it?

She's the only one left.

"I can do this," she whispers.

Closing her eyes, gritting her teeth, she pops open the sides of the chair to reveal the switches underneath.

"Begin manual activation."

She flips the first switches, the screens on either side of the plug lighting up. The entire Eva lurches slightly, and on the catwalk they don't notice, busy in their firefight.

"Stage 1," she says, "Releasing muscular locks and setting language to Japanese."

She slips the next set of switches.

"Stage 2," she says, "Setting plug depth and Ionizing LCL."

The hair on the back of her hair stands up. On the catwalk, Misato gets a clear shot at Rei, aiming her gun.

"I can do this," Asuka whispers, "I can do this. I can *do this.* Stage 3."

She grips the controls.

"Synchro *start!"*

Her vision becomes a blur of colors. Her world becomes one of light and sound. Through rings of light, the plug fills with a feeling of warmth, probing the back of her mind. A small chuckles, a child-like laugh fills her ears, as her mind descends, and all she can hear at that single, perfect moment, is a voice.

NEW MASTER.

A single beat of the Core rocks the plug.

HAPPY.

The A-10 connectors light up.

"*Second Child Recognized."*

Asuka's eyes open, glowing blue.

"*Synchronization Ratio holding at 87%."*

Her hands tighten around the controls.

"*Unit 02-*"

Outside, on the catwalks, they look up as four eyes flash brighter than they ever have before.

"*Has Activated."*

The red and white hand comes up, slamming through the catwalk, Rei leaping off of it and squatting on one of the railing as a dozen Section 2 agents and Lieutenant Colonel tread LCL.

"Rei!" Asuka screams, "Get on!"

Grinning from ear to ear, Rei leaps, landing on the shoulder and grabbing the shoulder pylon.

"I love Plan B!" she screams, "It's always so much better than Plan A!"

In the Entry Plug, Asuka grips the controls and screams. In response, Unit 02 barrels forward, slamming through the walls. First, they have to find and stop Unit 00, and just maybe get Rei into its cockpit so she doesn't do this alone. Then…

Then they have to save the world.

"I can do this!"

Chapter 25: Asuka Strikes!

The bulking mass of its finned tail disappears down the shaft last, heading towards Terminal Dogma. Their Lord and Master has arrived and as ordered, they opened the Way, allowing Him access to Heavens Door and the Complementation waiting beyond it. Braced against the catwalk, watching the last of the olive green disappear, a small part of Yui Ikari asks herself what she's doing.

Part of this, part of her, feels that something is wrong, but the Song forces it down, whispering the sweet promises in her ear, the promises of returning to her what she had lost in this pursuit.

Such thoughts give way as the far wall does as well. The single red eye glows through the dust and smoke as Unit 00 spots her, hissing through clenched teeth as it begins stomping towards her. Defense turrets at the Main Shaft spring to life, opening fire and bouncing off armor before the Evangelion waves, its AT field pulsing and sheering the guns from the ceiling.

"*I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS,*" the voice booms from Unit 00's speakers, "*FOR TOO LONG.*"

Section 2 agents on the catwalks begin opening fire. Unit 00 extends its hand, the AT field's pulsing followed by the sickening crunch of flesh against the metal floor. Bearing down on Yui, it opens its mouth and shrieks.

"Oh, God," Yui whispers, "Naoko?"

Unit 00 bears down on her, the catwalk at its eye love as it reaches out an armored glove to grab and crush her.

The wall next to them cracks and shatters, Unit 00 turning to it just for the red and white fist to slam into its jaw. Unit 00 reels, teeth flying from its mouth, just as the red and white bulk charges into it and slams them both against the far wall.

"Unit 02?" Yui screams.

From the speakers, a high pitched scream emits as both Evas are sent through the barriers.

"*Asuka?!*"

In the entry plug, she screams. Eyes wide, mouth open, in terror and sheer disbelief at what she is doing as her will drives forwards Zwei, the snapping visage of Unit 00 filling her entire view. It screams in her mind, hijacking her A-10 connectors. Every possible insult, every vulgarity. Every worthless word about how hopeless she is, how stupid she is, every little thing she did having no use whatsoever.

THIS is the best you can do? The voice demands, *I designed these, you worthless little trollop. Do you really think a dim witted little crazy bitch who just wants her precious boyfriend to hold her can own against the greatest scientist of her age? Are you delusional as well as lonely and crazy?*

"*Asuka,"* Rei says, "*The Angel's already gone down the hooole!"*

It sounds just like her *mother.* The Angel sounds just like *her mother.*

Angel. She has to stop the Angel. She has to stop the Angel. She has to…

Angels. Angels killed Mari.

Angels ruined Uri.

Angels will kill them all.

Angel has to F__ING DIE.

The scream is not one of terror, not one of pain. Instead, it is something she never knew she could produce. It is a scream of pure, palpable, solid rage. The connectors on her head light up, as Unit 02 barrels into the orange mecha, carrying them both across the open hangar bay, through the closing triple reinforced doors. Slamming her fists repeatedly into 00's face, she charges and grabs it, wrapping Unit 02's arms around it and running with a roar.

Standing on 02's shoulder, Rei's eyes go wide and she grips the shoulder pylon tightly, her laugh faint and nervous.

"Ho boi."

And Unit 02, Unit 00, and Rei go over the edge of the central Shaft and begin their descent towards Terminal Dogma.

-

-

Chapter 25: Asuka Strikes!

-

-

The two vertical eyes upon the flat, green face of the Angel turn as the ground shakes with the impact. The two mushroom like protrusions on the top of its flat head turn, the tendrils coming from the sloped triangle that forms a face twitching.

The center circle of the Arc Reactor glows as the rebuilt Hammer spins, splashing the sea of LCL as the flat head of the robot stares.

"*Well, lookie lookie, bitch! Seems we're all alone, and I've got a hangover. My name's Mana, and I'm going to be crippling you today."*

Shoulder turrets aim and fire, panels on the chest opening and firing off steel rods at Mach 17, burling the air in their wake as they hit with the kinetic force of naval destroyer cannons, the Angel reeling before it raises a finned hand and causes them to bounce off the orange wall.

The tendrils twitch, the fingers curling forward, gesturing towards Jet Alone Prime. In the cockpit Mana rolls her head and palms her fist.

"Have it your way, Fish Bitch."

Palming the hammer, the massive mecha charges. Missiles drop out of the sides and legs, engines igniting and firing, flying the distance and exploding against the field, ripples running through the yellow sea and shaking the red lined cave as the hammer swings back.

The head of hammer swings, jets firing on the back, quickly accelerating the 15,000 tons of mass to near sonic speeds as the bow wave becomes visible. In the cockpit, Mana laughs, ready to watch as countless tons of ugly fish Angel are spread along the length of Terminal Dogma.

At least, until a purple fist catches the head of the hammer.

Horn fist, the purple and green giant rises out of the waters, eyes glowing baleful yellow as the hammer drops. Its hand knits itself, the locks around its jaw straining as it bends forward.

"*Please be a paperweight, please be a paperweight-"*

The locks release, the bound blood red mouth snapping open as

Unit-01 pitches its head back and howls.

"*Oh, F__ me.*"

*

*

The screaming is not coming from the Entry Plug, but from the blue haired girl holding on to dear life on the shoulder pylon. Terminal velocity was reached some time ago as the two Mechas struggle, slamming each other against the green metal walls of the massive tube.

Unit 00's shoulder pylon opens, releasing the Progressive Knife, the edge glowing red as the vessel of the insane scientist stabs at Unit 02, a glancing blow slicing armor and skin and making Asuka scream in pain.

She screams through the pain, grabbing the hand with the knife and crushing the bone, pulling Unit 00 and slamming her chariot's head against the cyclopean visage.

USELESS LITTLE GIRL, the insane mecha screams, *TROLLOP! WHORE! THEY'LL NEVER LOVE YOU!*

"You're *worse than my mother!*" Asuka screams.

Unit 02 pitches forward, slamming into Unit 00 and carrying them both into the side of the shaft. A red white hand smashes into the side of the orange Eva's head, grabbing it and slamming it into the side of the shaft. Sparks fly, Rei ducking behind the pylon as metal meets metal, dragging along the final lengths of the shaft as both exit into the quarter mile drop over the sea of LCL.

Were Asuka able to see anything but her mother's face on Unit 00, she would have noticed the red stalactites and the dragging orange reliefs of the unnatural ceiling, leading into the sea of orange and red as they drop towards it.

But instead, all she sees is the rage, screaming it as she twists, Unit 02 twisting and planting both feet on Unit 00's chest, pointing the enemy's back to the sea as terminal velocity translates into force.

Screaming, shrieking, Unit 02 pounds on Unit 00's chest, riding it all the way down until both disappear under the LCL sea.

*

*

The LCL sea gives way to the white and yellow hallway, the tailed fin of the Angel disappearing down the corridor as Jet Alone Prime reels back, a heel imprint on its chest visible as Unit 01 flips back, snorting and growling as it crouches. Crouch gives way to a leap, claws snapping out with a howl.

"*Hey, Ichi. Nothing personal, but I'm gonna have to whip your ass."*

Bringing up its right arm, Jet Alone catches the claws, head butting Unit 01 before opening its shoulder turrets and firing flack in Unit 01's face to making it shriek.

"*Oh, poor baby! Baby don't like big booms? Well, f__ you!"*

A massive metal fist smashes into Unit 01's face, sending it flying back, the hammer swinging up and down before Unit 01 dodges, the hammer smashing through the shallow LCL and sending it spraying into Mana's field of view.

Unit 01 flips back, leaping, slamming into the wall before kicking off and tackling Jet Alone. Snapping its blood red jaws, it lunges at the cockpit. Mana screams, wrestling with the purple berserker as its jaws close and open directly in her field of view.

"*I have too god damn much of a god damn headache to deal with a god damn mind controlled god damn Eva!"*

Chest cannons fire, the grip loosing through a half dozen tank shell impacts against the chest armor. The hammer drops as the two massive metal fists box Unit 01's ears, loosening the grip and making it shriek. It holds its head, dropping off Jet Alone, whining as Jet Alone brings back its right fist as Mana laughs.

"My turn!" she yells, *"I can fly! Can you?"*

She grabs the power cord, Unit 01 giving off a confused growl as two metal hands grip the lifeline. Swinging back, Unit 01 howls before Jet Alone swings it into the wall.

*

*

Red fists pound on the orange face. There is no reason, only rage, Unit 02 bringing up its fists before sending them down into the LCL, Unit 00 pinned underneath its massive feet. Rei is screaming something about needing to get into Unit 00, but there is only the rage.

HE DOESN'T LOVE YOU.

Red hands lock around Unit 00's neck. She squeezes, screaming, roaring like an unchained beast. The *ANGEL HAS TO DIE.*

The knee comes up into 02's stomach. In the plug, Asuka coughs up blood, an orange blur smashes across Unit 02's face and making her recoil, throwing her off. A fist pounds against her jaw, a heel against her chest, the snapping sound telling her that the second progressive knife has been deployed. Unit 00 spins the knife, hissing through its teeth eye glowing as Unit 02 stands.

"Don't give up," she whispers, "Don't give up. Don't give in. It's just like mother. *It's just like mother.*"

It lunges. The knife deflects off the AT Field as Asuka's eyes glow. Swinging the knife around, it flips it in its hand as the red eye of the orange Evangelion glows, smashing through the field and stabbing the red giant in the shoulder.

Asuka screams, the red hands grabbing Unit 00's own.

"*You can't win,"* the voice of Naoko Akagi growls, "*You can never win. No matter what you do, you won't win. They'll always be better than you, little girl."*

The knife digs deeper. In the plug, she whimpers, feeling the pain herself, the Core shuddering beneath her.

"*Does it feel good, knowing how far down you are? Do you love it, never being able to talk down to anyone because you're always beneath their heel?"*

Unit 00 hisses, almost grinning. She clenches her eyes shut. Rei's voice is a distant echo. It can't end like this. It can't end *like this. It can't end like this.*

"*I will make it quick. You aren't worthy of a prolonged death. You useless little girl.*"

Teeth grit. Hands clench around Unit 00's wrists, breaking bone underneath the armor and meet. Opening glowing blue eyes, Unit 00's jaw shudders as she pulls the hands back, a slow growl escaping Asuka's throat.

"I," she whispers, "Am not. *Useless.*"

The jaw locks on Unit 02 strain, Unit 00's useless hands spasming as the four eyes glow white.

"*I. Am Not. USELESS."*

Pressing the red booted heel into Unit 00's stomach, she kicks it off, stumbling back towards the entrance of the main tunnel. Charging, Unit 02 releases a growl in time with Asuka's roar and Rei's squeak, bringing back her fist and slamming it into Unit 00's face.

"*You're just like my MOTHER!"*

Armor shatters, the eye piece breaking and teeth flying. The armored form of the orange Evangelion falls back as Unit 02 grabs it, carrying it to the ground, pinning it at the waist before bringing its fist up again and slamming it into the head once more, spilling the gray liquid that was once its head across the metal floor.

"Um, Asuka?" Rei asks, "I…kind of need to pilot it."

The speakers boom with Asuka's berserker shriek as the fist rises and comes down, flattening the armored helmet, repeatedly smashing against it until it resembles less the fully formed head of Unit 00 and more an orange and white manhole cover.

"Yeah, okay," Rei says, "Or not."

Fists come up and down, smashing armor, smashing artificially built bone, smashing the head until it resembles ground gray meet and mess, Asuka screaming in time with the blows. The red knuckles leave imprints, the final strike going through the head and embedding in the metal floor.

"Yeah," Rei says, "I think she's dead."

The orange hand shoots up and grabs Rei.

"Or not!" Rei yells, "Little help!"

A swipe breaks the arm. Pressing the heel against Unit 00's chest, Zwei grabs the arm and pulls, ripping it from its socket, slamming its heel down on the other arm and pounding at the chest.

The armor releases, scattering along the floor, displaying proudly the reddish orange Core against the gray flesh.

Asuka shrieks, Unit 02's hand grabbing it, digging into the meat as the Core glows in protest. The missing arm regenerates, the gray tendril of meet and bone grabbing at the hand, met only by scream after scream as the flesh begins to give way, cracks forming along the sphere as it finally gives, trailing yellow blood as it launches across the tunnel and finally smashes against the wall.

The form of Unit 00 spasms, shrieks, and finally falls silent.

"Okay," Rei says, "I think she's dead."

A blast of steam escapes Unit 02, like a relieved breath. Hopping out from behind the pylon, Rei walks in front of the green optics and waves her arms.

"Hey! Asuka! Angel!"

Unit 02 rises from the crouch.

"Right," Asuka says, "Let's go!"

And growling, Unit 02 charges down the hall to the Heaven's Gate.

*

*

Locks release around the waist and the top half of Jet Alone spins, Unit 01 howling as the power cord acts as an impromptu hammer chain, becoming a blue before Jet Alone releases and launches the purple giant down the hallway and slamming into the far wall.

"*Man, Ichi. Without Shinji at the helm, you're actually kinda stupid! I almost feel bad for beating up on you.*"

Falling off the wall, Unit 01 shakes its head and charges, roaring as it clears the last distance with a leap. Jet Alone's shoulders sag with a

burst of steam and hefts up the hammer.

"*Sa-WING BATTAH!*"

15,000 tons of metal meet 25,000 tons of angry cyborg and the hammer wins. Unit 01 hits the wall, bouncing off and going silent on the floor. One final kick to the face ensures it is unconscious as Jet Alone's back jets ignite and it takes off towards the end of the tunnel.

*

*

*

*

*

I am.

Through license of He who is called "I am" I have come.

Though I must drag my feet along the Base Earth on this most holy quest, I have come.

I shall merge with the enemy of Father, becoming a being of perfection and peace.

Through my Song, shall the hopes and dreams of the filthy Lilim be fulfilled in peaceful non-existence.

Let My words be the seeds of your ending bliss, growing within your souls.

I am the Master of the Heavenly Song of God.

Angel of the Unborn.

I am Sandalphon.

I am here.

It floats above the ground, its AT Field canceling gravity itself as the flat whale-like tail slides along the LCL stained metal, the two eyes on one side of its flat, manta-like head. Two arms fall the length of the

rest of the body, ending with clawed and bladed finned fingers, two tendtils escaping the flat closed mouth.

It stands before the two doors five times its size. On the other end is its goal.

Sandalphon has come.

Through its Song have the Lilim opened the way to their destruction.

Nothing can stand before it now.

"*It's like a religious experience. Wanna know my prayer?"*

It turns as Jet Alone Prime approaches, giving its hammer a testing swing.

"*Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I shall fear no evil! For I am driving 35,000 tons of F__ YOU."*

Back jets ignites and Jet Alone Prime charges. Swinging the hammer back, the jets ignite and the hammer accelerates to near sonic speed. Force equals mass times velocity, so that means 15,000 tons at Mach 1 should hit nice and hard.

The impact shakes the ground and can be felt topside. A cup of water in an apartment building in Tokyo-3 proper ripples.

And the hammer stops as Sandalphon catches it. The mouth tendrils twitch and the AT Field ripples, smashing the head of the hammer and tossing Jet Alone across the entrance, smashing into Heaven's Gate itself.

"*Okay,"* Mana groans, "*I see three Angels. I'm guessing I gotta hit the one in the middle."*

The Angel extends a hand. The world around Jet Alone Prime warps and it rises. The two vertical eyes of the Angel glow and the massive Mecha launches into the sky, the Angel watching as Mana's swears fade out before increasing in volume and bile before the gunmetal gray robot crashes to the floor.

"*Yeah…yeah, you keep floating there…let the world stop spinning.*"

Sandalphon raises its hand. Jet Alone rises, rotates, and is pinned against Heaven's Door by the AT Field, metal joints creaking as Mana hisses in pain. Inside the Ball, her eyes narrow, the targeting reticule

coming up, tracing slowly along the face of the angel as the genderless voice warns about structural integrity.

"*God bless…computer…aided…targeting.*"

The right control sphere twists and swings underneath, a joystick coming up in its place.

"*The engineer was a total nerd."*

She depresses the trigger.

"*Unibeam!"*

The arc reactor circle glows and fires out, a beam of accelerated white hot plasma striking the Angel in the face. It rears back, the tendrils parting and opening into a circular mouth lined with razor sharp teeth, its Core at the center. Shrieking, a sound like a beached whale, it lashes out, striking Jet Alone and sending it flying, floating over as it rises and grabbing its arm.

Metal tears and wires snap as Sandalphon tears it off with almost casual grace, Mana screaming as the Angel grabs the mecha's head and lifts it up.

"*Always the right F__ing arm!"*

It lists Jet Alone to eye level. It stares at it, waiting a moment before opening its maw once more.

"*Cut the theatrics, Cupid. Get it over with."*

"Heee~ey."

Something hits the tail. The maw closes and Sandalphon turns, eyes going wide as Rei runs up the tail, the AT Field around Sandalphon shifting as Rei's eyes glow.

The scales shift and turn to metal, a field of spikes rising up its back as Rei dodges, leaping over them, leaping off an extended AT Field and swinging onto one of the Angel's fingers, swinging on them like parallel bars before landing on its nose.

"Hi there," she says, "I'm Rei. That's Asuka."

Unit 02 barrels into the Angel as Rei jumps off and slams it face first into Heaven's Door. Jet Alone drops, red fists slamming into the back

of Sandalphon's head as the Angel emits a mournful cry, like chirping birds and cricket porn.

"*Asuka! Core's in the mouth!*"

The mecha climbs back to its feet, missile ports and batteries opening, aiming and locking onto the Angel.

And then there is a blur of purple and Unit 01 tackles it.

"*You are SHITTING ME!*"

The eyes of the Angel glow and Unit 02 goes flying back, bounced off its AT Field as the Angel turns, whipping tail leaving a gash along Heaven's Door as the locks open, the door slowly beginning to slide open. With a snort, the Angel grabs Rei as she leaps at it, off handedly tossing her aside, hearing her bounce off the wall and fall unconscious on the floor below.

The AT Field extends and slams Unit 02 against the opposite wall, Asuka screaming out in pain before the green hand wraps around her chariot's head and begins to squeeze.

The Song sings in her ears, probing her mind. The maw opens, the rows of swords displayed before her, slowly rotating like a great divine blender, her eyes going wide as her hands scramble for something, anything to use. Fingers wrap around cold metal and grip, and Asuka jams Jet Alone's severed arm into the maw.

The maw closes and Sandalphon hisses, the end of the arm sticking out between the tendrils, squeezing harder on Unit 02's head as it slams her into the floor, again and again, the palm of the Angel taking up Asuka's entire field of view.

Die, the song sings, *Die and then they all die.*

The hissing and spitting as Unit 01 wrestles with Jet Alone fills her ears, and she feels it. Warm and rubbery, and realizes what it is. A yank and it comes free, as the pressure on her head makes the vision tunnel. Again slammed against the floor, again the pain shoots through her, and she grits her teeth against the pain.

With a final scream, the arm moves. And the severed power cord from Unit 01 enters the severed arm of Jet Alone Prime, energizing the Shock Cannon embedded in its wrist to fire directly into Sandalphon's Core. The Angel of the Unborn allows itself a moment to realize what

is about to happen before the power output of a good sized power plant empties itself directly into its life source, the Fruit of Life roasting as the body spasms.

Unit 01's eyes dim and it collapses next to Jet Alone Prime.

Throughout NERV and throughout Tokyo-3, every citizen's eyes glow briefly and they collapse, holding their heads and groaning.

The vertical eyes of the Angel go wide, its skin turning from mottled green to sickly grey as its hand releases Unit 02's head, spasming and flapping its tail as it eats lightning and craps itself with thunder.

With a final, desperate act, it reaches for Unit 02's head.

The eyes cloud over and dim, and the Angel collapses on the Eva.

*

*

Popping two aspirin and downing them with a shot of scotch, Yui rubs her temples, waiting as Misato walks in, wringing LCL from her hair over the Mausoleum's floor. Gendo has his chair turned away, staring out the window with Fuyutsuki facing forward.

"Well?" Kozou asks.

"Akagi's team has a live feed in Terminal Dogma," Katsuragi responds, sharply saluting, "And…well, that explains why we can't find the Evas or Jet Alone."

"Heaven's Door has been re-set?" Gendo asks.

Misato nods. Pulling out her PDA, she sets it on the desk. The light flashes on, forming into a holographic screen where they can see Ritsuko's face.

"*I've found the Evas. Unit 00, or I should say what's left of 00, is in the entranceway of Terminal Dogma. I'm afraid it's a loss. The Core's destroyed, among other things, but from what we could see from security tapes it went insane with an AI version of the elder Dr. Akagi at the wheel.*"

"Well, it tried to kill me, so I can't say I'm sorry for it," Yui says, "Section 2's still compiling the security tapes. What's the status of the other Evas?"

"*Unit 01, 02, and Jet Alone are at Heaven's Door. The Angel is, to. It's corpse was found on Unit 02 with Jet Alone's arm in its mouth and a power cable jammed into it. We presume the cable jury rigged the shock cannon to fire on the core.*"

"So another one in Shinji's column?" Fuyutsuki asks.

Gendo snorts with a grin.

"Actually, Section 2 just found Shinji in a welded shut locker in the women's locker room," Misato responds, "And from what Ritz told me, Unit 01 doesn't have a Plug. Apparently, the Angel controlled it."

Yui nods, sitting on her husband's desk. Folding her arms, and affords Gendo a glance before turning back to Ritsuko.

"I assume Rei piloted Unit 02?"

"*Dr. Ikari, we found Rei near Jet Alone Prime. She's banged up, but fine. And we just opened up Zwei's entry plug, too. You're going to love this.*"

*

*

Her eyes open with a start, blinking to adjust to the light. Her entire body is sore to put it lightly. She feels like she hasn't slept in a week. Is this what it is like all the time? The thrill, the exhilaration, the… *losing yourself* to it, followed by the fatigue and pain?

"Hey there, trooper."

Blue eyes adjust, seeing the blob next to her bed. Blinking, adjusting, the blob becomes Misato. Arms folded, face split in a grin, her guardian walks over as Asuka sits up.

"Is e-everyone alright?" Asuka asks.

Misato laughs, patting her on the shoulder.

"Damned straight they are," she responds, "So…folding chair?"

*

*

The hologram blinks out of existence, the lights in the domed briefing room turning back on as the image of the dead Angel fades into nothingness. Yui turns as the main doors open, the double doors emitting the grunting woman, holding an ice pack to her nose as she mutters oaths.

"Someone tell me what happened," Kyoko Sohryu growls, "I feel like I was hit in the face with a truck."

Yui smiles. Clicking her PDA, the hologram projector fires up and shows a security camera view of the main Prinbow box, showing Kyoko advancing on a wounded, prone Rei.

"We were mind controlled by the Angel," Yui says, pausing the image, "It was classified as a Rapture-based attack. Three personnel were not affected. Rei because she is a Nephilem, Mana due to her cybernetic upgrades. During the attack, under the Angel's orders, you attempted to kill Rei."

"How are we alive, then?" Kyoko asks, rubbing her temples.

Yui's smile goes wider. She clicks her remote again, and the playback resumes.

In the image, Kyoko presses her gun against Rei's forehead. She says something, something particularly unpleasant, as Sohryu watches, arms folded under her chest. Which is when they see her.

Asuka picks up a folding chair from the side of the room and charges, swinging it into Kyoko back, drawing it back as Kyoko drops the gun and turns and launching Kyoko across the Box with a direct hit to the face.

The hologram pauses. Yui turns to find Kyoko's mouth hanging open and face red.

"This…what…*how?*"

"Somehow, Asuka was not affected by the mind control, either," Yui says, closing the hologram, "Oh, and that's not the best part, Kyoko. You're going to love this."

Composing herself, clicking her tongue, Sohryu walks to the projection table and braces her hands against it.

"Yes, yes," she growls, "While I'm sure you enjoy seeing that girl have

a violent outburst, what happened to the Angel? How are we still alive?"

Yui folds her arms, sighing with a contented, almost matronly smile on her face. Clicking the remote, the projector powers up again and begins displaying telemetry, ratios, numbers, and finally a picture of a red haired girl with a percentage number next to it.

"Asuka," Yui says, "Killed the Angel."

"Bullshit."

"She manually activated Unit 02 with an 87% synchronization score, wrestled and then beat to a pulp a berserk Unit 00 after dragging it down to Terminal Dogma. Then she engaged the Angel and jury rigged Jet Alone's shock cannon to fry the Angel's core."

The metal underneath Kyoko's fingers begin to warp.

"I'm not making this up," Yui says, "I forwarded all the relevant data to your office. Everything's there. Akagi's retrieval team recovered Asuka from the plug a few hours ago and she's resting. Since she, well, saved the world we're going to hold off on the debriefing."

Circling the projector, Yui pats Kyoko on the shoulder.

"Now, I don't expect any nepotism or you to treat her special," she says, pursing her lips and leaning in to Kyoko ear, "But if you'll excuse me, I need to talk with the Chairman about Asuka being classified as the Second Child."

The sounds that come from Sohryu's throat would not technically be classified as human.

"We'll talk later," Yui sing-songs, and walks out. She leaves just before the screaming begins.

*

*

Misato left shortly afterwards. She heard Misato talking with Father in the hallway, protesting that, no, he can't visit her yet, she's resting. Father reluctantly agreed and then pulled rank, and Asuka sits up to find her father standing in the doorway. A grin is on his face and his

hands are thrust in his pockets, and he waits.

"Hi," she says.

"Hey," he responds, "Um…how are you?"

"I'm…okay," she responds, "A l-little shaken b-but…"

He nods, walking over. He sits in the chair by the bed, folding his hands in his lap. Chewing his lip, his gaze runs downward, silent and pensive.

"So," he says, "It's probably…not worth much coming from me but…"

He sighs. She waits.

"I'm proud of you," he says.

He waits, staring down at his hands as if they hold the answers. Deciding quickly that they do not, he continues.

"I'm…not very good at this," he continues, "And…well, that thing was going to kill us all. You stopped it. You, Mana, and Rei, but…mainly you. Right now, the entire Human Race exists because of you, Asuka."

Scratching his head, he sighs, looking up to find her staring at him with a shaky smile across her face.

"So…well, I've been a crappy father and…I don't think I said this enough to your sister but…I'm proud of you. I am…and your mother's on the warpath so I'll be around a lot more. So…that's it."

"Okay," she whispers.

Slapping his knees, he stands up. Reaching out, he ruffles her hair, an odd gesture to him as she gives off a shaky smile, and without another word, walks out. She lies back, staring at the ceiling for a while long. Sleep comes soon enough.

It is a good sleep.

Chapter 26: Runaway Eva

The lift hums to life. Descending down the central shaft of NERV-1, floors pass by the wire mesh cage as it begins its swift heading to the bowels of the pyramid. Yui Ikari allows herself a glance at her son, who has been shifting uneasily next to the blushing Asuka the entire time. It has been two days since the averted extinction of the human race via Sandalphon, and from what she understands Shinji has actually been a little shy.

"What is with them?" Ikari asks.

Next to her, Katsuragi chuckles.

"During the mind control, Shinji tried to put the moves on her," Misato responds, "He's been feeling guilty about it ever since. I've got a plan."

"Are you breeding the pilots?" Yui asks, raising an eyebrow, "And if you are, try to be subtle about it. Shinji isn't the type to react well to overt gestures."

The thick metal plate passes by, giving way to the main sub-Geofront cavern.

"Right," Yui says, "Pilots."

Rei, Shinji, and Asuka stand at attention. In the past two days she has succeeded in convincing the Old Man to have Asuka declared the Second Child and the official pilot of Evangelion-02. Sohryu, Dr. Sohryu, was not happy to say the least. She has, however, agreed to stay on to continue maintaining Zwei. Yui figured she would quit in a huff, but she can work this in, to.

"As you're aware, Unit 00 was grievously damaged," Yui says, "And it will take some time for full repairs. So, since Rei has the most functional experience in an Evangelion, we can't have her on the sidelines. Thankfully, NERV has a spare Evangelion."

The floor shifts past, revealing the open metal cavern of the Cages.

"NERV-Bethany was scheduled to receive it, but since Bethany was destroyed by ADAM, it was refitted to operate on land and with a power cord, and shipped here, originally for Sentry duty via AI, but will be designated as Rei's new Eva."

Cage 1 comes into view. Rei's eyes go wide as the smile begins to spread across her face.

"Each Evangelion is specialized," she says, "Unit 01 is the testbed of the technology and Unit 02 is the frontline combatant. This one is… special."

As it comes into view, Shinji's eyes go wide and Asuka tilts her head as they see the thing of green metal. Misato stares at it, rubs her eyes, and resumes staring.

"Is that…" she asks, "That's…is that a *drill?"*

It starts as a sound resembling escaping steam as Rei's hands clasp in front of her, the smile giving way to a sound that would best be described as a long, happy Squee. Asuka and Shinji take a step away from her as the sound completely leaves high pitched and enters ultrasonics, before Rei pushes past Yui and Misato to see her new toy.

A head taller than the other Evangelions, pylons jutting from the arms instead of the shoulders and ending in what appear to be turret mounts, it stands on four ball jointed legs ending in clawed feet. Its left arm ends in a four bladed claw and its right arm ends in a drill almost as long as the rest of the Evangelion.

The entire thing is painted green and white, highlighted in golden yellow, the end of its jutted, spike-shaped forehead ending in a glowing white eye and a honeycomb of viewscreens forming into something resembling a pair of angular sunglasses.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Yui says, "Evangelion Provisional Unit 05."

-

-

Chapter 26: Runaway Eva

-

-

The door to the bedroom slides open, and rolling his head, Shinji enters his room. After the synch tests they were let go for the day, but it was already seven at night at that point. They had dinner while walking home; Misato had a late shift, so no drive.

He hasn't really had a chance to talk with her, or talk with anyone. He can remember, dimly, the Song in his head. It was speaking to him, whispering promises that he must have given into…he doesn't remember much of it.

And then there was Unit 00, and all the memories piled on. Opening up his laptop, he sits at his desk, tapping the play button and smiling. His father forwarded the files to him, found in old family archives that no one's paid attention to for the past ten years or so.

The video is of a five year old boy in a school uniform, caked in dirt and mud, holding a balloon and a turtle and smiling as wide as his face can hold over the accomplishment, yelling excitedly at one of the two chaperones about what he accomplished. Behind him, a woman in a red sweater and black dress with red hair done up in a bun and her ever-present pearl necklace tries to get a word in about how she had to practically drag him out of the lake.

Finally, she pats the boy on the head, laughing before motioning over the camera man and mashing her own mud-caked hand over the lens, the video ending with that.

For two years, his mother was in and out of the hospital, following that first test with 01…Ichi. So, when they were busy, when Mom couldn't take care of him and since God knows Father wasn't that good at parenthood, they counted on Naoko Akagi.

Auntie Naoko.

Since he was told about her, about how she wanted to murder him and his mother to get his father, he has had to deal with Angel attacks, being trapped in the Dirac Sea, Asuka's sister's death, that school Dance and finally the mind control. He hasn't had a chance to let it sink in that the woman who his pre-school teacher thought was his *mother* is dead.

The door knocks. Closing the laptop, he pads his way open to the door and opens it, rewarded by Asuka's shaky smile. She's already in her bathrobe, her hair hanging freely. Shifting from side to side, she waits as he hangs his head and sighs.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Um…for what?" she asks.

"For what I…tried to do when the Angel was…I shouldn't have tried

that."

"It's…um…alright," she says, reaching out and taking his hands in her own, "It is…you've b-been distant. Why?"

He sighs, scratching his head. For a moment, for a brief moment, he considers blowing it off and closing the door. The moment passes when the oddest thing happens.

"Can I come in?" she asks.

He nods. Moving out of the way, he pads over to his laptop, opening it as she walks into the dimly lit bedroom, tip toeing to the bed and pulling her PDA out of her robe's pocket. Tapping the screen, she stares at the picture and instructions she downloaded. There's now way she can *bend* like that, is there?

"I'm sorry," he sighs, "I've just had a few things I had to think about. Before ADAM, my Mom told me about Rei."

"Okay," she says, tilting her head at the picture, "Do you mean about who made her?"

"Yeah…when did you find out?"

She turns the PDA over when he turns to her, hiding the picture.

"Uri mentioned something," she says, "I used Mother's passcode to get the details from the MAGI. Is it b-because of Dr. Akagi?"

He nods.

"Mom was in and out of the hospital when I was younger," he says, leaning against the desk, "Dr. Akagi…her mother, I mean…she took care of me a lot. Then one day, Mom comes home, tells me I have to pack, and I go live with my aunt and uncle."

He stares at the floor, shaking his head.

"I thought she was still alive, just busy. Then…I find out right before I moved away, she threw herself…she killed herself."

She nods, staring at him. Clicking off the PDA, she stands up and walks over, placing her hands on his own. Leaning in, she presses herself against him, his arms wrapping around her, his nose in her hair and his heartbeat in her ears as she presses her ear against his chest.

"Sorry," he says, "I've been so…wrapped up in this I never congratulated you."

"It's alright," she sighs, "I-it's alright. W-would you like me to s-stay?"

He nods, silent, rubbing his hands up and down her back. She leans in, standing on her tip toes and pressing her lips against his own. Her arms drape over his shoulders, his hands moving up, running through her hair as their eyes close. A small, happy moan escapes her lips and he smiles, resting his forehead against hers as the kiss ends.

"We should turn in," he says, "No telling when Mom's going to call us in next."

She nods. Slipping out of his arms, she ambles out of the room, down the hall and into his. She rests her back against the door, sighing.

"Stupid," she whispers, "Stupid stupid stupid. Still not going to sleep with me. Didn't even notice Misato's perfume."

Walking over to the bed, she grabs the doll by the arm, flipping onto the bed and resting it on her lap.

"I don't know," she says, "I really thought he would go for it, this time. But he seemed so sad."

"You can't force it, Asuka," Dollie squeaks back, "Give him time. If you force it, you'll push him away. He's not just out for sex, and have you considered that he might want to take it slowly?"

"Maybe," she sighs, "Maybe. He seemed so sad, tonight. I thought it would cheer him up."

Sighing, she pulls the doll close, staring at the ceiling.

"Maybe tomorrow."

*

*

The green plate gives way, the Entry Plug spinning in as Rei shifts in her seat. They have not yet modified the plugsuit, but foresaw no major problems with the activation test. The ear to ear grin on Rei's face only strengthens that assumption. Never before have they seen a pilot so eager to 'break in' their Evangelion.

"*Stage 1. Setting language to japanese and releasing primary skeletal locks. Stage 2. Setting plug depth and ionizing LCL. Stage 3…*"

Even better, they have it in launch capacity. If everything goes right, she gets to ride around her new pony and maybe blow up some targets.

Maya's voice pauses.

"*Wait a few minutes, Rei. We've run into some errors.*"

Rei raises an eyebrow.

"What?"

*

*

The doors at the back of the Prinbow box open and Kyoko Sohryu walks in. Glaring at Misato as she grins towards her, she takes up position behind Maya, clearing her throat.

"Ibuki, what is wrong with 05?"

"Well, Go-Kun-"

"What?" Kyoko interrupts.

"Affectionate nickname for Provisional Unit 05," Misato says, leaning in next to Kyoko, "Basically, 05's giving us some trouble due to system locks on it's AI core."

Sohryu sighs. Folding her arms, she glances around the room to confirm that she is, in fact, the highest-ranking member of Project E in the Box. Present with her currently is Katsuragi, Ibuki, and the two other bridge crew, Makato and Aoba. Glancing out the window, she spots Dr. Ikari heading their way and scowls.

"Where is Akagi?" she asks, "And where are our other pilots?"

"In the infirmary," Misato responds, "Asuka has a sudden onset of the flu and Ritsuko's treating her. Shinji's in the locker room and on his way, and Mana has the day off while we're refitting Prime."

Kyoko rolls her eyes, tapping her foot as the side door open and Yui

strides in, pulling the folding chair from the side and sitting down in it next to Kyoko.

"What's the hold up, Maya?" she asks.

"AI Core's locked down," Maya responds with a sigh, "I'm starting to disengage the locks now."

Pushing past Misato, Kyoko leans on Maya's shoulder and glares at the screen.

"I'm the AI specialist," she says, "Let me see that…"

Pushing Maya and her wheeled chair aside, she bends over and begins tapping at the keys. Maya stares at her, eyes wide as Kyoko's hands become a blur, the holographic screen taking up much of the view window displaying the disengaging red locks.

"What's this?" she asks.

Yui leans over next to her.

"What's what, Kyoko?"

"This subroutine," she says, pointing at a red lock with English written along it, underlined with Mandarin, "It says this has to be kept on as a condition for China allowing it to be active."

"And?"

"And it's the main thing keeping us from engaging the AI core," Kyoko sighs, "Disengaging it."

The red lock breaks and separates, and standing, Kyoko allows herself a thin smile as she steps aside and allows Maya to take her station.

"There," she says, "Now we can proceed. Ibuki?"

The eye lights up on Unit 05's brow. The entire Evangelion shudders, the locks around its jaw breaking as it growls.

"*AI Core Locks disengaged,"* a voice booms through the shoulder mounted speakers, "*Communism detected! Combat Systems, engaged!*"

The cradle the Eva is encased in shudders, the rails engaging and launching the Evangelion to the surface. The Box goes silent. Misato taps her fingers, looking from side to side before Kyoko turns and runs

out.

Maya taps her fingers together and turns her chair around.

"Well, *fuck."*

*

*

Sitting in a chair in front of the white, simple desk, Asuka rocks back and forth. Dr. Akagi had to run out due to some sort of emergency, promising to be back soon to give her some medicine. Well, if it's an emergency, she should get to her Eva. That makes perfect sense, doesn't it?

Sighing, she stands up. No use standing around, she thinks, walking over to the medicine cabinet Akagi was rifling around in. Since it was sudden, she thinks, there has to be something around here that she was going to use.

An orange, unlabeled bottle is at the front of the cabinet. That must be it, Asuka thinks.

Any sort of liquid countermeasure would have to be at least four ounces. That is perfectly sensible from a scientific perspective. So, taking a plastic measuring cup, she pours the reddish orange liquid up to the line, watching the plastic distort. Well, she thinks, that just means its *extra* strong, doesn't it?

Bringing the cup to her lips, she takes a small, tiny sip. Eyes go heavy and her face turns bright red as the liquid passes her lips and down her throat, the feeling of delirium from the flu leaving her and replaced with a fresh, happy form of delirium.

A second sip, and the world becomes more colorful. Placing the cup down, a bright, giddy smile crosses her face. She isn't sure what the medicine is, but it sure *works.* Nibbling on her lip, she looks around, seeing everything new purpose, new use. Mind goes into overtime as she claps her hands together and squeals.

So this is what it's like to be Rei, she thinks.

"Asuka?"

She spins on her heel, raising a heavy eyebrow as Shinji stands in the doorway, staring at her.

"There's an emergency with Unit 05," he says, "They need us in the Evas…are you alright?"

She smiles, pats her stomach, and belches like an elephant seal.

The plugsuit, she likes. They're tight enough that she sees just about everything. Giggling, she sways on her feet back and forth as he approaches, the confusion on his face evident. Lunging forward, she wraps her arms around his neck, grinning from ear to ear.

Then the secondary effects kick in. Her face turns green and her cheeks puff up, and she pushes away from him and dives to the garbage can, grabbing the lid and emptying the contents of her stomach into it. Pausing for a moment, he rushes over and pulls back her hair to keep it from getting soiled.

She pauses, looking up at him, smiling faintly. Then her cheeks puff up again and she continues vomiting.

"Gott Verdammt! What is *wrong* with you two?!"

Heels clacking on the metal floor, Kyoko walks in, glaring at the two. Her gaze turns from Shinji to Asuka as the girl finishes vomiting, Shinji helping her stand and walking her to one of the infirmary beds.

"Ikari, Unit 05 has gone berserk," Sohryu says, walking over to the medicine cabinet and picking up the orange bottle, "Get to Unit 01. Katsuragi will brief you."

Shinji stares at her, hand still on Asuka's shoulder.

"We don't have time for me to repeat myself, Pilot," she says, rifling through the cabinet, "Go."

He grimaces, nodding to Asuka before running out. The boy is diligent. She will give him that much. However, Kyoko thinks, that is not the main problem. Staring at the plastic cup, the bottom has already begun to warp.

"Damn it," she says, "I am unsure of who to be upset at. You, for drinking this. Or Akagi, for not keeping this locked. I will settle for the latter."

Twisting the cap closed as Asuka grimaces and collapses onto the bed, Kyoko grabs a purple bottle and pours into another cup, a semi-clear blue liquid filling it.

"Asuka, sit up."

Obediently, the girl does, her eyes bleary and face green.

"Drink."

Forcing the cup to her lips, Kyoko tips it back, emptying the fluid as the girl's complexion clears, her eyes blinking as she stares at her mother. Reason returns as the girl looks down, hands folded in her lap as she does silent.

"What you drank was an alcohol-based relaxant that Akagi is developing for the Evangelions," Kyoko says, dropping the cup in the garbage, "Had you drunk the entire cup, you would be dead. And I would be looking for another pilot."

Asuka says nothing. Sighing, Kyoko removes her glasses and rubs the bridge of her nose.

"Stand up," she says, "Turn around."

Nodding, Asuka does so, Kyoko pushing aside the hair.

"Mother…"

"I am seeing them for myself," Kyoko says, staring at the burns, "When did you do this?"

"W-when I was…f-five."

"After I had you removed from the Program?"

The girl nods. Kyoko turns and walks to the medicine cabinet, replacing the bottles and closing the glass doors, dumping the warped plastic cup in the sealed metal trash can next to it.

"You are the pilot of Evangelion Unit 02," she says, "As such, it is in my vested interest to keep an eye on you. I will not allow the Pilot of my Evangelion to engage in self-destructive behavior. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Mother."

Pulling out a pen-sized device from her lab coat, she flashes the red

laser over Asuka's forehead.

"Temperature is normal. Very well. Report to the locker rooms and change. You will be Pilot Ikari's backup. Go."

Asuka nods, and walks out, breaking into a run when the infirmary's door closes. Sohryu stands at the cabinet for several moments more, before palming the laser thermometer and walking out herself. Another mess she has to clean up…

And maybe she will have a *talk* with Pilot Ikari when this is all over.

*

*

Panels open in the perimeter of Tokyo-3, plates four times its height rising into the air, surrounding the city like a giant metal fish bowl. Unit 05 pauses, the yellow visor glowing and scanning lasers playing over the steel surface. Its four ball jointed knees bend and its wheeled feet jam into the street before the fingers bend back.

"*Obstruction detected,"* it booms, "*Composition: Molecularly compressed Titanium Alloy enhanced with pulsed quantum resonance."*

The palm of claw opens up, a focusing crystal jutting out and beginning to glow.

"*Chance of mission hindrance:"*

A circle of light spins around the crystal and 05 points the arm at the wall.

"*Zero Percent!"*

The plasma blasts out, superheating the metal and blasting it outward into a hole bigger than the Evangelion. The legs rise again, and Unit 05 continues it trek westward.

*

*

"What do you, it was *made by the Americans?!"*

Maya squeaks, wincing under Misato's glare as the Big Screen lights up with telemetry, Unit 05 exiting Tokyo-3 proper on a course due West. Next to her, Makato's jaw drops open and Shigeru shakes his head, turning back to his console.

"Unit 05's AI is based on an American-made combat protocol."

Furiously typing, a window on the left side of the screen opens up to reveal Shinji's face as Yui runs onto the bridge.

"*Unit 01, ready for Sortie,"* he announces, "*Have we heard anything from Rei?"*

"The AI's locked us out," Misato responds, looking up at the screen, "Shinji, we're sending you up track 12. You'll come up 5 miles west of Tokyo-3. Move to intercept 05 and force the plug out."

He nods. The screen vanishes as the view to the Cages shows Unit 01's eyes flashing white.

"Unit 01 is activated," Makato announces, "Path is clear! Eva launch!"

The cradle rocks and Unit-01 rockets upwards. Yui grimaces, standing next to Misato as the Big Screen shows them 05 continuing its march.

"Poor girl," she says, "Rei must be terrified."

*

*

The scream coming from the plug is loud, and continuous, and resembles the pitch and tone of a football fan during a particularly impressive play. Hands up, index and pinky finger prominently displayed, the landscape is a blur with plenty of shit blowing up.

"*WOOOOO! I wanna marry this baby!!!!!!"*

Flipping the switches lining the seat towards the butterfly controls, a holographic display appears, buttons labeled in English hanging in the virtual space in front of her. Clapping her hands and squealing, Rei hovers her hands over the controls.

She just found its *weapons suite.*

"Oooooo…what does *this* button do?"

She taps the glowing red depression on the board. The pylons snap opens, two red thermal lasers lancing out and carving through the highway in front of her. Squealing, she begins tapping buttons at random.

Lasers carve up the roads and mountain sides as it continues wheeling along. A pair of missiles fall out from between the legs, engines igniting and flying off to detonate somewhere in the distance. Chin mounted machine guns rip up the landscape, the left hand plasma cannon firing off in pulses and caving in part of a passing hillside.

In the distance, a pair of rails rises up, the cradle carrying Unit-01 appearing with a lurch and releasing the purple Eva. The shoulder pylon opens and the progressive knife deploys, and in the cockpit Rei grins.

"Alright! Eva on Eva knife fight!"

*

*

"Misato, I've spotted 05," Shinji says, urging Unit-01 on, "Proceeding to Engage. I'm going to attempt to remove the Entry Plug without having to damage the Unit."

"*Roger that, Shinji. We're getting Asuka into Unit 02 and sending her up as soon as we can."*

Knife in hand, held out at ready position, Unit-01 approaches slowly, cautiously, point forward as the quadrupedal mecha stares at him.

"Easy, there," Shinji says, "Easy boy. We're not gonna hurt you."

The wheels fold inward, turbines going into the ankle and slats folding out into three toes forming a tripod mount for each leg.

"Misato," he says, "I think it's stable and-"

"*Enemy Unit detected,"* 05's speakers boom, "*Engaging red Communist hostile!"*

"Or not…"

The back legs brace, the entire bulk of Unit-05 rearing back before the two front legs slam Unit-01 in the face and send it flying back.

Crashing into a nearby hill, the horned face looks up and pushes off, rolling before the green mecha slams into the hill it was lying on.

"*Communism will not be tolerated,"* Unit-05 booms, two holographic American flags appearing over its pylons, "*Democracy is non-negotiable!"*

"I think it's *pissed!*"

"*What was your first clue?!"* Misato yells, "*Aim for the joints! Disable it before Rei gets hurt!"*

*

*

"Drill. Drill. Drill! Drill!! Drill!!! DRILL!!!!!"

Banging her hands into every position over the weapons control, she has yet to find the button that activates the bright red drill arm. Meanwhile, the 15" guns have already fired into Unit-01's face and the Star Spangled Banner is playing in the Entry Plug.

"*Communism is the ultimate form of failure!"* Unit 05 booms, stomping on Unit-01's foot and cracking it across the face with its clawed hands, "*America will triumph! Buy war bonds!!"*

*

*

"Who the Hell *built* this thing?!" Misato screams, "Get him some damn backup!"

Unit 02's cradle shudders and the red Eva launches.

"I'm not sure about this," Yui says, stroking her chin, "Asuka's isn't exactly in her…is it me or was she acting strange?"

"Yeah, well, she's a smart kid. She can at least help distract 05 before the package gets there."

On the big screen, they watch as Unit-02 ascends; the cradle releasing and Unit-02 stepping forward…and nearly collapsing. Shaking its head, rolling its shoulders, it approaches Unit-05 as the large green quadruped continues stomping on Unit-01's head while speakers blast Yankee Doodle Dandy.

Charging, the red and white giant brings its fist back, crossing the distance as Unit-05 continues its pounding of the purple giant…

And reaches both arms around the Eva as the speakers boom with a loud cackling.

"Unit-02 has…restrained Unit-05," Maya says, "Is she…hugging Go-Kun?"

The double doors to Dogma open, Ritsuko skidding to a stop next to Misato and Yui. Her face red, her eyes wide, she stares at the image of Unit-02 bear hugging Unit-05 and palms her face.

"Asuka accidentally had a bit of that Eva-calming solution I've been working on," she pants, "She's drunk off her ass."

*

*

Tires skid as the limits of the city are reached and the car flies through Unit-05's exit hole, outrunning the retracting fishbowl armor and speeding into the countryside in pursuit.

The blue Alpine Renault A610 streaks along the outlying roads of Tokyo-3's general area, outside the city and over the hilltops where they can see the giant robots kicking each others asses. Pushing down on the accelerator, Kaji Ryoji grins as the engine purrs, and in the passenger seat Commander Gendo Ikari's left hand wraps around the Jesus handle.

"Really wish you wouldn't criticize my driving," Kaji says.

"Really wish you wouldn't drive like a maniac," Gendo responds.

Swerving up the winding road, Kaji floors the accelerator as Gendo's knuckles turn white, the car's breaks squealing as it takes a tight turn before emptying onto the straight stretch of road leading to the Cliffside that has not yet been leveled by Rei's new tank.

"This plan is *stupid,*" Kaji growls.

"Watch it work, Mr. Kaji."

The car skids to a stop at the top of the cliff, the doors kicking open as Gendo stumbles, grabs the box from the back seat and walks to the edge of the cliff. Unit-05 is trying to shake off the drunken Unit-02 while Unit-01 crawls away, Shinji's groans echoing through its speakers.

"I'll be behind the car," Kaji says, inching back as Gendo walks forward and opens the box, "You know. Engine block."

Gendo opens the package, retrieving the object and folding it open. Slowly, he removes his glasses, folding them and placing them in his jacket before placing the object on his head; a black stovepipe hat.

Unit-05 pauses. Shrugging off Unit-02, the giant green mecha stomps over, standing ramrod straight as scanning lasers play over the Commander.

"*Visual profile recognized,"* it booms, "*Match confirmed: President Abraham Lincoln."*

The drill-arm comes up in a salute.

"*This Unit is honored to serve, Mr. President. What are this Unit's orders?"*

"Stand down AI defenses," Gendo says, "Open all channels between Core and Entry Plug and prepare for synchronization."

*

*

In the Entry Plug, Rei pouts as the holographic weapons console vanishes, the screen folding out and becoming Yui's worried face.

"*Rei! Thank God! Are you alright?"*

Oh, Rei thinks, she may have *worried* people.

"Um…I'm fine," she says, tapping her fingers together, "So…Unit-05's under control?"

"*Yes, Rei. We're still trying to figure out how the AI activated the weapons*

suite, but that's probably a glitch with the Entry Plug. Rei, we're ready to have you Synch with 05 and navigate it to the lift."

She sighs, nodding. Cracking her knuckles, she grips the controls and closes her eyes.

"*Synchro start!*" Maya calls out.

The world becomes a tunnel of colors. Her vision clears, descending into the womb of the Mind of Unit-05, singing blank songs and opening her eyes towards the blank slate before her. Her own abilities come to bare, her eyes glowing soft red as her mind navigates the corridors, the blank, featureless Core hovering above her.

It is just data, she thinks, just an AI that acted out of programming.

But this, she thinks, this has potential.

Reaching in, she hears alarms, but her mind enters the Core, quickly retreating as soon as it enters, her vision returning to the plug and her eyes opening as she smiles.

"*Weird,"* Yui says, "*Rei, for a moment your synchronization peaked at near 400%. Is everything alright?"*

"Mm-hm," Rei says with a smile, "Ready to go home."

The screen blinks out. Seizing the controls, Rei's eyes glow red.

"*First Child recognized. Synchronization holding at 77%. Unit-05 has activated."*

The Eva lurches and begins walking a cradle already visible at the lift for it. Humming to herself, Rei cheerfully guides the Evangelion. And deep within Unit-05, deep within its flesh and inside the blood orange Core, something begins to stir.

It may be weeks.

It may be days.

But the first hints of a true sentience gestate and grow.

*

*

"So, it's a blank slate," Yui says, rubbing the bridge of her nose, watching as the three Evangelions return to their Cages, "What Rei did was imprint herself on the Core. A bit of herself combined with the AI will create an actual intelligence inside…Go-Kun's core and we will have a functional Evangelion."

Placing her glasses back on, Yui turns to the rest of the bridge crew as Misato takes a drag from the hip flask and hands it back to Ritsuko.

"Yeah," Misato says, "Two hundred foot tall Rei. This should be *interesting.*"

"Never said that," Yui says, walking over to Akagi, taking the flask and taking a drink, "God, I never did. Let's play this one by ear."

*

*

As the pilots are escorted out of the Cage, with Shinji helping the stumbling Asuka, it watches them leave. The first hints of intelligence peak, the empty Entry Plug sitting silent and lodged into the green mecha's spine.

A console flickers.

"*Access granted. Unit-05 instruction manual loading. Please specify subject…subject received. Section IX-091. Drill controls."*

Chapter 27: The Situation of Others

The knock on the door wakes him. He blinks blue eyes to dispel the sleep, he rolls onto his back and props himself up onto his elbows. The clock reads eight o'clock in the morning…he overslept. Again.

He is getting soft and complacent. Perhaps he should do something about it.

Knocking again. He doesn't want to answer it, but he eventually will have to. Face the day, like he has to face every day.

"I'm coming," he growls.

Grabbing the buttoned shirt, he throws it on, closing the buttons and not bothering to tuck the shirt into the black pants, walking barefoot across the carpeted floor and swinging it open to see his face staring back.

"Good morning, Uri," Kaworu Nagisa says, "Have you been sleeping well?"

The door slams shut and Uri pads his way back to the bed.

Flipping onto the bed, he laces his fingers behind his head and stairs at the bedroom's hanging ball lamp, watching the fans spin. He sleeps, he eats, he listens. It has been a week and a half since he arrived at the Makinami household, which was curiously bereft of Mari's mother. According to his host, Ms. Makinami is currently touring the world.

When news reached her of her daughter's death, she only inquired if she had to pay for the funeral.

He hasn't cried. He isn't really sure if he can, or deserves to. The scenario has replayed itself in his mind over and over again. If he had not been impulsive he would have waited for Akagi and they could have examined the core. If he had been more alert, he wouldn't have been knocked out and could have disabled her before the attack started.

If he hasn't blown off her feelings, maybe she wouldn't have been taken over by the Angel.

That's the issue, isn't it? That he blames himself not only for her death but for the events leading to it. Is he really to blame for this?

"Get out of head, Nagisa!" he shouts, sitting up.

Every day it is like this. His mirror playing therapist, his own thoughts invading his. It isn't natural and yet…and yet they could be *twins.* They could be long lost brothers, and he was adopted by Mother. He has no idea who he is. Not now.

The door knocks again. Hopping off the bed, he marches across the room. His right hand curls into a fist, and if Nagisa is standing there he will cave that boy's nose in.

"What *is* it?!" he yells, swinging the door open.

Standing in the doorway, the blonde haired blue eyed girl in the black and white maid uniform squeaks and steps back, recoiling as if struck. His hand releases, fingers uncurling as the pigtailed girl averts her eyes from his gaze. Mouth opens and he closes his eyes, looking away. Is *this* how he always is? The girl has the same mouse expression his sister has half the time…

Because of *him?*

"I'm sorry," she squeaks.

"No," Uri sighs, "I am. I am sorry. It's been a long…"

"Mister Nagisa filled me in on the details, Mister Sohryu," she says, "He…will be busy, so he asked me to attend to you, sir."

The girl is his age, probably around sixteen. Opening his eyes, he sees her eyes are a shade of crystal blue and her smile, while a little forced and shaky defines her features well. The maid uniform is probably just for his benefit and he notices it a little snug around her waist and bodice, and he figures that, once again, Nagisa is trying too hard.

"Alright," he says, "I think I've been…cooped up here long enough. Then. What is your name?"

"My name is Annette," she responds, "I work for the Makinami household. In their absence, I work for Mister Nagisa."

"I see," he sighs, "Annette, I am going to shower and change and then I think I might be more pleasant to deal with. Could you come back in…half an hour?"

She nods, her smile a little firmer, a little more confident. Turning on

her heel, her high heels click against the wooden floor as she turns and disappears around the corner.

Closing the door, he walks over to his duffle bag. No time like the present, after all.

-

-

Chapter 27: The Situation of Others

-

-

Head spinning, he stumbles out of the cockpit. His left side is sore and he's pretty sure at least one rib is bruised, if not cracked. Shaking his head, his vision clears and his hand rests against the warped metal of the VTOL's primary bulkhead as his shoes press against the soft grass.

"Okay," Pieter Sohryu, Sub Director of NERV-1 says to himself, "Bearings. Let's get…ow…bearings."

He's holding up pretty well for being front and center for a crash. The VTOL gave out outside the city limits of Tokyo-3, crashing in the field that he currently stands in. Flipping open his cell phone, the screen sputters and goes black.

"Well, shit," he breathes, scratching his head and looking around. The foam padding in the cockpit went off as planned, turning the cockpit into a cannoli. Feeling his chest, his arms, and his legs, he stands up shakily and rolls his shoulders. Nothing broken, nothing too badly bruised.

Hell, he's been through worse. He was in the Bendswehr. He was a *Hauptmann* in the *Heer* and saw actual combat following Second Impact. He's been through worse, although it's a given that was some time ago.

"Right," he says, and opens up his NERV jacket, unholstering the gun and checking to make sure it's functional.

Something near the crashed craft shifts. Grimacing, Pieter flattens his back against the metal and begins shifting, slowly creeping across the fuselage. Times like this he wished he waited for a Section 2 escort,

rather than hopping over to Tokyo-2 for that meeting. He wanted to get back quick so he could make dinner reservations.

Ducking behind one of the dorsal vents, he inches around, making out the shape bent over a silka deer corpse, large hands ripping out chunks and shoveling them into a maw. The shape is…green and large, a dorsal fin tracing down a finned tail that doesn't touch the ground.

"What the Hell…?"

It pauses in its feeding. A row of two vertical eyes turns in Pieter's direction as the creature rises, three fingered finned hands stained red as it turns and twitches the two tendrils where its maw should be.

The maw flattens to the flat triangular face as the creature stares at Pieter…and charges.

"Shit!"

He ducks down and dives behind the VTOL, the creature slamming into the ground instead of him. Pushing up on its arms, it shakes its head, turning and opening its mouth into a circular maw lined with daggers.

Firing off three rounds, the bullets vibrate as they go in, shredding through a barely visible barrier and causing an ejection of blue liquid. The creature pauses, stares at Pieter, and lunges hands forward, squealing.

He ducks, flattening to the ground as the creature, the Angel, passes over. Rolling onto his back, he watches as the Angel pauses, turns, and launches itself at him. A panel flips open with a bit of force, and he slams the button that reads 'Open Bay Door.'

Bolts unlock and the cargo bay door of the VTOL swings open and directly into the Angel's face. There is an indentation left on the metal, and when the door swings shut again, the Angel is laying face-first in the dirt in front of Pieter. Climbing to his feet, he walks over and finds that the thing is breathing, but unresponsive.

"Well. Shit," he growls, "Now I gotta carry your ass."

And groaning, he begins riffling through the cargo bay for supplies.

*

*

His school uniform was good enough save for the blazer. Walking out of the room, he navigates his way to the main dining area. When he lived in Berlin last, the apartment they had was on the premises of the NERV-2 grounds. It was Spartan and functional, with a metal table for their dining room and florescent lights in the ceilings.

The table in this dining room could easily accommodate twenty people, and most likely has in the past. The chandelier overhead refracts light in every direction, evenly lighting the room that is at least as big as the conference room at NERV-1.

Breakfast, which is hot cereal and a side plate of sausages, eggs, and potatoes, is already out for him, as well as a cup of coffee, a cup of juice, and a cup of water.

"Mister Sohryu, everything is prepared," Annette says, standing by the chair at the head of the table, "Do you need anything else?"

The rest of the table is empty, save for the candelabra at the center.

"Did you cook this?" he asks.

She nods.

"Is there…anyone else in this house?"

"Mrs. Makinami will not be back for several months," she says, "As well, her former husband is in Tokyo-3, and…"

"I see," he sighs, "Well…and Nagisa?"

"Is meeting with the Chairman," she responds, "Is everything alright, Mister Sohryu?"

He sighs, nodding.

"Good enough," he says, and sits down.

*

*

The lawn and leaf bag drags along the grass, one of the arms hanging

out of the opening and dragging bits of dirt along the claws.

"This was supposed to be my night off," Pieter groans, "I was going to go out to dinner, surprise Kyoko. Maybe then get a quickie since she seems into that sort of thing."

Gripping both hands around one of the straps attached to the bag, he sighs.

'But nooooo. You had to knock my VTOL out of the sky. You had to show up out of nowhere and now I'm dragging your fishy ass all the way back to Tokyo-3."

He drops the bag, nostrils flaring.

"And what the *HELL* is that smell?!"

Yelling, he kicks the unconscious Angel repeatedly, swearing at the top of his lungs as he does so. Sighing, muttering swears under his breath, he wraps the straps around his hand and continues walking.

"I'm not angry," he says, "No, no. I'm not angry. I only get angry at Kyoko nowadays, and that always leads to angry sex. You don't seem the type."

Groaning, grumbling, his eyes narrow as he sees smoke in the distance. Smoke means people. People mean working cell phones. Dragging the fish angel behind him, he sees the simple green tent and the fire, a set up tripod camera and nerf rifle next to the tent.

A head with a mop of brown hair and a set of glasses peaks out.

"Aida?" Pieter asks.

"Sub Director Sohryu?" Kensuke Aida asks, adjusting his glasses, "Um…what're you doing all the way out here?"

"Long story," Pieter says, dragging the bag behind him, "Got your cell phone?"

Hopping out of the tent, in shorts and an army jacket despite the chilly weather, Aida pops open his cell phone…which sputters and emits an array of sparks before dying. Pieter palms his face.

"Mother…f__er!"

*

*

He went for a walk. The estate grounds are massive, about the size of the school back in Tokyo-3. Behind the house is a hedge path, leading to a view of an artificial lake and waterfall. The sheer money such a project must cost is staggering to consider, but yet Uri stares at it, arms folded and wind and spray in his hair.

"My adopted father built it. For what purpose, I am unsure."

Leaning against a tree, standing in the shade which he just notices is there, Kaworu smiles as Uri spins on him.

"Have you been following me?" Uri asks.

"I come here," Kaworu responds, "To think."

"Or to have me think," Uri sighs.

Kaworu smirks, pushing off the tree.

"Isn't that why you're here?" he asks, "You are conflicted, Uriel. Your mind wanders and you assign blame that is not necessarily true. I only wish to help."

A grimace crosses his face and Uri stares at the noon sun.

"Help is not for me," he says.

Nagisa sighs, folding his arms as he begins circling Uri.

"You are in pain," he says, "You are conflicted. You blame yourself for Mari's death, even though it was the Angel, not you, that was truly responsible. And how do you blame yourself…well, we should count the ways, shouldn't we? Or does even the mention of her cause you pain?"

The knuckles crack and the fist snaps out. Recoiling, Kaworu's back slams against the tree as he wipes the blood from his lip.

"You are upset," Kaworu says, not missing a beat.

Uri's hand grips the front of his shirt, pulling him off his feet as blue eyes streaked with red narrow.

"You may look like me," Uri breathes, "You may *sound* like me, but

you are *not* me. Do not *guess* how I feel."

Pushing him up against the tree, Uri backs away. Swearing at Kaworu, swearing at himself, he turns and begins walking back to the manor. Arms folded and watching him, the red eyed youth ponders, watching his mirror retreat.

This, he thinks, Will need a more subtle touch.

*

*

The MREs were a nice touch. Aida was a military nerd, just like his profile said, and had supplies for a weekend out camping. This did mean he'd have to head back early, but on the other hand he would have to. The unconscious Angel in the black bag sort of mandated that.

No, wait.

Scratch the unconscious part.

"Sooo…you gonna knock it out again?" Kensuke asks.

"Got a reinforced steel door handy?"

The bag shreds. Making a sound somewhat like whistling and bad gas, the Angel rises, staring at them through its two vertical eyes.

"I really should've invited Rei," Kensuke sighs.

The Angel pauses at the mention of the name. Its eyes shift, rotating to a horizontal configuration, staring at Kensuke as Pieter stands up and unholsters his gun, clicking off the safety as he aims it at the creature's eyes.

You have tricked us, the Angel thinks, echoing between their ears, **You have deceived us, Lilim.**

"Yeah, that's how it goes," Pieter says, pulling back the hammer as Kensuke retreats into the tent, "God's in his Heaven, and you are *here*."

You threaten us. You are Lilim.

"I'm the Lilim who's little girl kicked your ass," Pieter responds, "And

I've been dragging your fishy ass for the past few miles. So you can either lose the attitude or we see how you work without eyes."

You cannot destroy us. The Light of your Soul is weak, Lilim.

"Light, shmight! I've got rockets!"

The Angel pauses. Pieter turns and wisely steps to the side as Kensuke exits the tent with a green tube with the word 'Bazooka' prominently stenciled on in Rei's handwriting.

Perhaps…we have been…hasty?

"Aida, why do you have a bazooka?"

"Why don't you?" Kensuke responds, "Okay, fishy fishy. What say we all relax and talk a bit. You know. Bond."

Pieter gestures to one of the logs set up around the campfire. The Angel floats, lowering itself and resting its tail on the wood. Aida closes the bazooka's trigger, placing it back in his tent and hopping on another log as Pieter keeps the gun on the Angel.

"No moves," Pieter says, "Pretty sure this won't kill you, but it'll hurt like a bitch."

The Angel says nothing, does nothing as its tail scrapes the ground. It folds its massive hands before it as Kensuke reaches into his knapsack and pulls out an MRE, pouring some of his bottled water into it and then tossing it at the Angel.

"What are you doing, Aida?" Pieter asks.

"Eh, I always overpack," Kensuke says with a shrug, "And besides which, if he gets aggressive, Rei'll know. We're like *this."*

He crosses his fingers. The Angel and Pieter both stare at him before turning back to each other.

"So," Pieter says, "Let's not be strangers. I'm Pieter, this is Ken. And you are?"

We are Sandalphon.

"Yeah, about that," Pieter responds, "Sandalphon kinda died when Unit 02 made it eat lightning and crap itself with thunder. How are you Sandalphon?"

Lilim are limited. Singular and individual. We are not. I am Sandalphon. That which you destroyed is also Sandalphon. I stayed behind, to continue.

"The Fourth Angel did something like that," Kensuke says, face suddenly thoughtful, "Well, tried. Rei tracked it down and killed it. Then she blackmailed me into being friends."

The Angel and Pieter stare at Aida.

Oh…kay.

"Right," Pieter breathes, and turns back to the Angel, "I'm not convinced you're not a threat, if you don't mind. What were you doing out in the middle of nowhere?"

Healing. Consuming mass to restore our self. But we…cannot bring ourselves to attack, once again. The loss…is too great.

The hammer of the gun pulls back. His teeth grind and Pieter growls, aiming at one of the eyes.

"Don't," he says, "Don't you even try."

Your mind is open. You have experienced loss. Your progeny.

"My daughter died," Pieter hisses, "She died when one of you shoved themselves into her brain and took her with him when he kicked off."

He steadies his aim. Kensuke shifts to the side, staring at the gun as the Angel stares impassively at Pieter. It leans forward and opens its maw, exposing the core for Pieter to see. Slowly, shakily, the hammer returns to its original position and the gun drops, the maw closing.

"Yeah, okay," Pieter growls, "So what did you lose?"

The Angel goes silent for a long moment. Folding its hands before it, its mouth tendrils twitch.

Our future.

*

*

Tightening the belt of her bathrobe, Annette walks out of her private

bathroom and across the single room quarters she keeps in the Makinami estate, opening the door to find Uri waiting. His hands are in his pockets and his hair is mussed up, his face still a grimace and leaves leaving marks on his shirt.

"Mister Sohryu?" she asks, "Are you alright?"

"I'm far from alright," he says, "May I come in?"

Stepping aside, she allows him entry. Heavy footsteps as he enters and takes a look around. A simple bed, a desk with a plugged in laptop and a dresser and closer. There is not much to the room, which he figures may be typical for a house servant, but he would not know. Even still, there is more…luxury…to this room than what he has allowed himself.

"Is something wrong, Mister Sohryu?"

"I have been talking to Nagisa," he says, "I think…I need to talk with someone else, to. Nagisa told you why I am here, correct?"

"Some of it, Mister Sohryu."

He nods. Bracing his hands against the desk, he nods.

"I cannot find anyone to blame me," he says, "No one to hold me responsible. I *killed* her, and I am told it isn't my fault."

"But…it wasn't."

"I should have waited," he says, "I should have waited for Akagi to arrive before I smashed that core, waited for them to study it. I acted…rash. I acted from my gut and it *killed her.*"

He goes silent, staring at the desk, staring at his hands. He hears the foosteps but does not react, sitting in the chair and folding his hands in his lap.

"I blame myself," he says, "I blame myself for all of it. I could have stopped it…I could have saved her. I've gone over it over and over again."

"What do you blame yourself for?"

"For letting her catch me off guard and knock me out. If I knew, I could have overpowered her and gotten the Core away from her. If I didn't reject her for…for ridiculous reasons, maybe she would have

been strong enough to resist the Angel. I wish I could have…"

Fingers run through his hair. Her hands rub against his shoulders as her arms wrap around him.

"No one blames you," she says, "Because you aren't to blame. I know for one Mari wouldn't. She would have…smiles, accepted what happened, and moved on. And she certainly would have been upset if you simply blamed yourself for what was an accident. And it was. You had no way of knowing what would happen."

He looks up at her, through bleary and puffy eyes. His hands unclench, taking her own as they are offered, and with his face twisting, he pulls her close. Burying his face on her shoulder, she rests her hand on the back of his head, a small smile crossing her face as he finally breaks down.

*

*

"I don't understand why we couldn't just, you know, take a van or something."

"That's because for some reason we ended up in that one part of the countryside away from all the roads, Aida. How's the trenchcoat?"

An acceptable fit. We question whether or not the Lilim will be fooled by this disguise.

"Trust me, it works in comic books."

Approaching the apartment building the three figures stop and assess. Pieter is at the head of the group, despite Kensuke being their navigator. Behind Pieter, the floating mass in a brown trench coat and hat shifts from side to side, the eyes moving completely from each side to get a better view of the street.

"Katsuragi's on the third floor," Kensuke says, leading them across the street and to the apartment entrance, "Why do we need a landline?"

"Sandy's field fries cell phones."

Walking through the build entrance, the cloaked Angel gives the doorman a stare before following Sohryu and Aida, floating alongside

them into the elevator which speeds up to the proper floor. Pieter peaks his head out first, darting to the door and waving them along before jamming the button down.

The Angel floats up next to Pieter, removing its hat as Aida tip toes next to them. The door opens and Misato Katsuragi stares at Pieter, and then over at the Angel which stares back through vertically blinking eyes.

"Katsuragi," Pieter says, "Can I use your phone?"

Misato's eyes roll up and she collapses.

"I'll take that as a yes," Pieter says, "In! Everyone! Move!"

The Angel floats in, Aida darting in afterwards before Pieter ducks into the apartment and closes the door behind them.

*

*

Synch tests are over but he still has something else to do. Asuka had a meeting with Dr. Ikar…with Mom, so they could still go home together depending on how long this takes.

Knuckle rap on the door and the wooden door swings opening to allow him entry into the Spartan, pristine office.

"Doctor Sohryu?" he asks, "You wanted to see me?"

Kyoko Sohryu looks up from the reports and the coffee mug, putting away the flask in her desk. Picking up a report, she uses it to gesture towards an empty chair in front of her desk.

"Sit, Pilot Ikari."

Shinji nods, taking the seat and sitting down. Hands in his lap, he waits as Sohryu finishes signing off a requisition form and placing it on the top of her outgoing pile, which at this point fills up the entire mailing box.

"I called you here because I wished to talk to you," she says, "And to make a request, Pilot Ikari."

He nods. Hands in his lap, he glances at his watch, shifting in his seat.

"I understand that you do not have the highest opinion of me, Pilot Ikari," Kyoko says, folding her hands on her desk, "But that is not why you are here. I make no apologies for my actions and do not plan on doing so. Why you are here is because whether we want it or not, Asuka is now 02's pilot. And it is in our best interests to keep her as such."

He shifts in his seat, nodding. Glancing at his watch again, he weighs the options of listening to whatever this woman wants to go on about and simply walking out. One would probably get him a good long lecture, but he hasn't been given any reason to suspect this woman is stable or sane.

"I will make this simple, Pilot Ikari," Kyoko continues, "I wish to know if Asuka exhibits any behavior which is abnormal."

Slowly, tentatively, his hand rises.

"Yes, Pilot Ikari?"

"Define 'abnormal,' Doctor Sohryu."

She pushes her glasses up her nose, narrowing her eyes.

"I mean," he says, shrugging, "You mean behavior right now? Or stuff we don't know about? Because from what I can see a lot of behavior Asuka has is *abnormal,* Doctor Sohryu. Would you like me to list them all? Or maybe prepare a spreadsheet?"

Sohryu stares at him. He sits back, folding his arms, waiting for her reply. Such a retort, however, is ended when the phone rings.

*

*

The door to the small second freezer opens, and with a towel draped over one flipper, Pen Pen exits his apartment and walks into the living room. Floating on the couch, the Angel turns, locking eyes with the bird.

"*Wark.*"

Well met.

Pieter holds the arms and Kensuke holds the feet as the two carry

Misato into her bedroom. Ducking out of the bedroom and shaking his head, Pieter walks past the penguin and the Angel and over to the kitchen and hanging phone.

"*Wark.*"

Your concern is well founded. However, we are not the sentient spirit of whatever fish you have eaten.

Waddling over to the fridge, Pen Pen hopes onto his stool and retrieves a can, returning to the Angel and offering the beer with a bowed head. Taking it in its webbed fingers, the Angel's eyes shift to horizontal before it opens its maw and tosses the can in.

Thoughtfully chewing, it tilts its massive head before swallowing and belching, a sound somewhere between chirping birds and angry giraffes.

Magnificent.

Standing in the hallway, Kensuke watches as the Angel picks up a glass bowl and empties the beer into it through its fingers.

"So, wait," he says, "Does he…just eat the can and not the beer?"

"I think we'll go mad if we think about this too much," Sohryu says, taking out his wallet and flipping through scribbled pieces of paper, "Let's see…what was her department number…"

The bedroom door slams open, narrowing eyes causing Aida and Pen Pen to freeze in their tracks.

"Who…wasting…beer?!"

Kensuke ducks behind Pieter as he dials the number. Pen Pen stands defiantly in front of Misato as she stumbles into the living room. The Angel sitting on her couch turns to her, before tentatively dipping its hand into the bowl and draining it of the beer.

"Better."

Staring at the Angel, Misato folds her arms and turns to Sohryu, mouthing 'What the F__' at him as he holds up his hand and waits for the phone to ring.

"Yes. Doctor Sohryu's office, please."

*

*

She picks up the phone, still staring at Shinji.

"Yes?" she asks.

Her eyes go wide.

"Where are you?!" she demands, "You're where?"

She narrows her eyes. Her scowl disappears as she sits back in the chair.

"Go over that again," she says, *"Who* is with you?"

*

*

"Yes, Kyoko," Pieter sighs, leaning on the counter, "I have a miniature version of that last Angel sitting on Katsuragi's couch. Yes, it accidentally forced my VTOL from the sky, then I had to beat it up and took it here. It's defecting. It wants to change sides. No, I am not drunk."

He nods, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Okay, send the containment team. We'll be here."

He hangs up the phone, walking over to the couch and slumping onto it next to the Angel.

"Not a word, Katsuragi," he says, holding his hand up, "I just beat up an Angel with my bare hands and dragged its ass most of the way to Tokyo-3. I am not in the mood to be chewed out by people who do not outrank me."

Misato nods. Walking to the fridge, she opens it, reaching into the back and pulling out one of her rare, treasured imported beers and tosses it to Pieter.

"I'm honored," Pieter says, pulling the tab.

We find the metal to have a particular taste.

"Find it odd you're intimidated by Katsuragi but not me."

She shot Father with a directed energy weapon. We have little reason to believe she would not do the same to us.

"Good point."

But in the interests of our well-being, please keep us away from the red Lilim. She did kill the greater us, and would not want to die a second time. And the blue one, as well. She frightens us.

"You and everyone else, Sandy."

Pieter holds up his fist. The Angel nods, holding up its own, and for the first time in human or angelic memory, Misato witnesses the first Angel/Lilim fist bump.

"Wark."

"You and me both, Pen Pen."

*

*

The containment vessel is a large glass tube, nestled within the lift elevator as it speeds down the main shaft of NERV-1. Arms folded, eyes narrowed, Yui Ikari stares at the Angel as Pieter stands next to her, Dr. Akagi and Maya watching the Angel tentatively.

"MAGI confirms that the Angel shares the blue pattern of Sandalphon," Maya says, tapping her handheld MAGI display, "However, it also states that the S2 organ is not inside the Angel."

The fruit of life was within our greater form. This form is a… backup. We are all Sandalphon.

Yui rubs her temples, sighing.

"I got used to it," Pieter says, shrugging.

"I'm sure you did," she sighs, "Still, this is Sandalphon, but I think we should maybe get a different name for him. Sort of to differentiate between Sandalphon that Asuka destroyed and our guest."

The Angel nods. It turns to Akagi as she sighs, tapping on her PDA and nodding.

"The Angel seems to have a collective intelligence," she says, "Perhaps…Legion?"

Mark 5:9. My name is Legion, for I am Many. This name is acceptable.

"Well, I sort of think of him as Sandalphon Junior," Pieter interjects, "How's 'Junior'?"

That is also acceptable.

Maya raises an eyebrow, lowering the MAGI terminal and turning to Yui.

"The Ree just chimed in," she says, "They demand that the Angel be named 'Wuffles' and be turned over to them as their new puppy."

They go silent. Pieter shifts from side to side and the Angel shudders.

That…is not acceptable.

Chapter 28: Q&A

Log 1.0012.

Subject: 11th Angel. Sandalphon-2 organism (code-name: Junior/Wuffles the Wonder Fish)

The chair wheels squeak as it is wheeled into place in front of the projector. The senior staff is already gathered in the debriefing room as the holographic projector fires up, and Yui Ikari takes her place front and center.

The light forms into the image of the Angel, its eyes shifting between vertical and horizontal configuration. Junior, the spawn of Sandalphon, looks between Dr. Akagi, Commander Ikari, and Sub-Director Sohryu before turning back to Yui.

Sitting behind Pieter, Kozou Fuyutsuki grins as Pieter sits down next to him.

"Your bare hands?" the old man asks.

"And a steel cargo bay door," Pieter responds, "Not your managerial method?"

"My methods haven't gotten us a live Angel."

Greetings, Doctor Ikari, Junior sends, **We are pleased that you have made time so quickly so that you would debrief us.**

"It's our pleasure, Junior," Yui responds, "Please be aware we are keeping you in Sheol for your safety as well as ours. Until we are certain you are not a threat, we are keeping you isolated. In addition, until we are sure of your biological stability, we wouldn't want you hurt wandering around NERV-1."

The Angel nods.

"Sheol?" Pieter asks.

"Need to know," Kozou responds, "You'll be briefed eventually, but for now all you're cleared for is that Sheol exists."

Folding his hands in front of him, Kozou grins as Pieter stares at him. Snorting, the Sub-Director of NERV turns back to the interview.

"Junior, tell us about the Angels," Yui says, "In particular, what are their current goals?"

The Angel tilts its head. Folding its webbed hands, it pauses and twitches its mouth tendrils.

We have lost our goal. Father is gone. Father is enraged. He intends to not just cleanse the world of the Lilim, but of His progeny, as well. Completion cannot be achieved as was promised, so there is confusion.

"About?" Yui asks.

Father is changed. And we are frightened of facing Him. We must become stronger and destroy Him to be completed.

"ADAM is dead," Ritsuko says, tapping her PDA, "Pilot Ikari and the sensor data we received from Unit 01 confirmed that Unit 01 killed ADAM before it exited the Dirac Sea."

"He never really confirmed," Gendo adds in, "Just something about metaphorically kicking Him in the face repeatedly."

"Quiet, dear," Yui responds, and turns back to Junior, "Junior, do the Angels know anything about ADAM's status?"

Yes.

The Angel centers its gaze on Yui, mouth tendrils twitching, trembling.

We feel it. Like a presence gnawing at the back of the soul. Like fire burning through brush, becoming brighter and hungrier as it comes closer. We cannot deny it, even though we silently dream that He is dead.

Father will return.

-

-

Chapter 28: Q&A

-

-

Tightening the towel around his waist, Shinji raises an eyebrow as he exits the locker room and enters the steam filled chamber. A recent install at NERV-1, the rationale was established by his mother as 'the single most dangerous job in the world demands luxury.'

So, NERV now has an onsen.

Dips his toe in the water and shrugs, lowers down to the ankle, then down to his waist as he folds the towel next to the bath. He's in the male bath, the female bath on the other side of the wall occupied by, from what the voices coming through the vents tell him, is Rei and Mana.

Kensuke asked him to take pictures.

Touji begged with his eyes.

Leaning back, content with the fact that he is in no way interested in the two women beyond that wall, he rolls his head and grins. He twiddles his toes, rests tired muscles which are much more tired than a 16 year old's should be.

And, of course, he screams like a girl when he opens his eyes and stares into a pair of red eyes hovering over him.

Grabbing the towel, scrambling out of the bath, he quickly wraps it around his waist and prepares to launch into the verbal tirade against Rei for invading his privacy. This is exactly when he notices that Rei is not in a towel, but in a black, green lined plugsuit with the numbers 09 stenciled over her chest.

"Rei?"

"Nuh-uh," the chalk skinned, blue haired girl says, folding her hands behind her and grinning from ear to ear, teeth bared and gleaming, "I'm Kiko! And you're Shinji!"

"…yeah…"

"That's great!" the girl shrieks, clapping her hands, "Absolutely fantastically great! We really really wanted to meet you!"

Oh, shit, he thinks, *She must be one of Rei's sisters. Didn't they do something unspeakable to Kensuke a couple of weeks ago?*

He begins moving backwards, slowly and silently. Heel leaves the

floor first, toes leading the way as he tries to back towards the locker room door.

"Oh this is **perfect** isn't it? I mean, I hack the MAGI, I get out, and I get to tell all sorts of stories to everyone else about our big brother! Isn't that perfect? It reaaaaaally is, isn't it?"

Rei is the stable one, he reminds himself, and apparently not just biologically. Didn't one of them take over a forward base? Those thoughts come to mind most prominently as the Rei, Kiko, turns her glowing eyes towards Shinji and her grin spreads from ear to ear.

"Come over here, big brother! Let's **BOND.**"

Knees buckle and Shinji breaks into a sprint, crossing the distance to the door and running into the locker room. Skidding to a stop, he turns just in time to see Kiko's fist slam all the way to the shoulder through the door, ripping open a hole for her face as she stares with glowing red puppy dog eyes.

"Big brother?"

He ducks into a bay of lockers.

"Big brother needs to put on some pants!" he shouts.

A pause. The locker room shakes. The lock on Shinji's locker cracks and falls off, and his clothes fall onto a bench.

"Oooooookay," the girl sing-songs, "Then you're getting me ice cream!"

Shinji nods. Peaking his head around the corner, he sees the hole in the door has been yanked shut. Slowly walking to the bench, he backs into it. Sitting on the bench, he hears the distant tapping on the door. Counting seconds, humming, he hears her waiting.

"Okay," he says, "There's a way to deal with this…right?"

Needless to say, he has little if any experience on being a brother… and then he nods. Flipping open his cell phone, he dials the number and waits.

"Touji? Are you free this afternoon?"

*

*

"Audio/Visual Log systems online," Maya Ibuki announces, the floating hologram displaying her at her console in Central Dogma, "*Everything said in the conference room is being recorded as a 3d log for future reference. We're ready to begin when you are, Doctor Ikari.*"

Yui nods. Sitting at the desk next to her, hands folded into a bridge underneath his nose, Commander Ikari nods as well. Clearing his throat, Pieter stands up, walking over and standing to Yui's right, next to Ritsuko as she activates her portable MAGI terminal and brings up a list of questions while Kozou leans back in his chair.

"Let's begin," Yui says, "Junior, can you hear us?"

Yes, Doctor Ikari.

"We are going to ask you questions," Yui says, "Answer them to the best of your knowledge. Akagi?"

The Angel inclines its head towards Ritsuko as the brunette scientist reads off the list.

"Junior, what do you know about the origins of the Angels? In particular, do you know of anything that came before ADAM and Lilith?"

Such is knowledge not known to us. If knowledge of the Origins is known to any, we would believe Lilith would know the answer you seek.

"I see. Then what are your earliest memories? Just what are the Angels?"

We are what you term, Angels. That is how the single tongue of the Lilim interprets that which we are.

Yui sighs as Pieter shrugs. The Angel pauses, floating in the holographic image as it ticks together its mouth tendrils and waits.

"I believe what Doctor Akagi is asking is in regards to your origins, Junior," Yui adds, pushing her glasses up her nose, "Are you pre-First Impact life forms? Aliens? Mutations created by Second Impact?"

The Angels tilts its head. Its eyes re-align.

We do not know. Only Father, or maybe Lilith, would know. Our

first thought upon awakening following Second Impact was that we must wait for Our turn to attempt Complementation.

"So this is some sort of contest?" Pieter asks.

That which consumes Father becomes like Father.

"Great," Pieter sighs, "Okay. How many Angels are left?"

More than there were before.

*

*

Kana Suzuhara is a girl of around eight years old. Her black hair runs down to just past her shoulders, her eyes the same shade of blue as her older brother's, and where Touji has a look that falls somewhere between joking and constipated on his face, his little sister's expression tends to fall somewhere between 'serious' and 'construction foreman.'

So, when her brother bolted out of the apartment on his day off from school, she knew something was up. It wasn't hard to track him down or to guilt him into taking her along, and yet…

Sunday morning shopping has become something of a ritual for many families. A combination of the normal Japanese five and a half day school week and population in the high hundred thousands keep most marketplaces of relatively small sizes, lacking warehouses and superstores that are found in Tokyo-2.

So, Touji's defense that he was heading to the markets to meet his friend was acceptable. The cold sweats were another story.

"Now, Kana, remember Rei?"

"You mean the really, really weird classmate?" Kana asks, walking alongside her brother as they continue down the street into the downtown markets.

"Yeah. Well, the girl with Shinji looks like Rei, but she's kind of…not."

Someone waves by the Ben and Jerry's stand near the local open air restaurant. Sitting at one of the tables by the stand, Shinji smiles as Touji and Kana approach. Across from him, holding the remains of a

waffle cone, a girl with a photo resemblence to Rei Ayanami, dressed in a beige NERV dress uniform and with a face covered in dried ice cream.

"So," Touji says, "Uh…"

"Touji," Shinji says, "This is Kiko. My little sister."

Kiko smiles, waving as ice cream covered lips part. Kana smiles back as Touji shifts from side to side, already planning escape routes.

"Big brother," Kana says, grabbing Touji's wrist, "You're being *rude.*"

Touji smiles. A tight smile, eyes locked on Shinji and gesturing to the side. Nodding, he stands, walking over with Touji as Kana sits next to Kiko, both boys watching before Touji wraps his arm around Shinji's shoulder and laughs.

"I look like I'm smiling, but I'm freaking out," Touji says, "Isn't she one of the girls who broke Ken's brain."

"I think she's the one who felt up Asuka, actually."

"And you're…*fine*…with this? Doesn't NERV, you know, have security?"

Shinji nods.

"They're watching right now," he says, "But my parents are in some sort of meeting and if I just threw her to security…well, it wouldn't end well for anyone. Besides which, I have to admit I'm a little *curious."*

"Of what death is like?"

"Of what having a little sister's like."

One eyebrow raises and Touji's face shifts into the combination of thoughtful and constipated that he wears when he tries to wrap his head around a subject.

"They're my sisters," Shinji continues, "And she hacked the MAGI, broke out of NERV, and found that uniform somewhere because she wanted to meet *me.* I could just toss her to Section 2, but it makes more sense to keep her around. Doesn't it?"

"Kind of…"

A shriek and both boys cringe. The sound, bellowing up from nearby grocery market splits the noise of the crowd. It resembles screeching tire or the mythical wail of the Banshee, but Touji tilts his head and Shinji stares at the noise is followed by yelling, and threats.

And more than a little German.

"Well, shit," Touji says.

Shinji sighs, palming his face. Walking to the sounds of the screams and swears, he approaches cautiously, making out the sounds, recognizing the voice. Most definitely, he knows what this heralds. Nothing good will come of this, he thinks.

Which is one of the reasons he's surprised when the door to the grocery swings open and the woman is thrown out.

"And stay out!" the grocer yells, waving his fist in the doorway, "Crazy bitch!"

He balls the plastic bag full of fruit and tosses it, the woman ducking out of the way and screaming something unpleasant and teutonic in response. Face red, spittle spraying from her mouth, the woman grabs her fruit and snarls a suggestion.

Turning, she pushes her glasses up her nose and marches off, halting as she comes face to face with Shinji.

"Doctor Sohryu?" he asks.

Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu stares at Shinji, narrowing her eyes as she holds the bag of pulped fruit in one hand and her purse in the other. Touji and Kana approach, standing behind Shinji, Touji's hand protectively in front of his little sister.

"Can I help you with something?" Kyoko asks.

He never gets to actually answer her. Mostly because there's then a squeal and a leap, and Kiko tackles the scientist.

*

*

"More," Pieter says, "What exactly does *more than before* mean? Is there a set number of Angels?"

Yui and Gendo exchange a glance. Gendo's calm betrays a raised eyebrow.

"Elaborate, Junior," Yui says, "What do you mean by 'more'?"

Before us, there were to be nine more. Now, it is uncertain. Father, in His last moments before descending into the Underneath/Beside/Void loosed upon the Base Earth new seed.

"Yes!" Rei shouts, pumping her fist, "Job security!"

Yui and Pieter spin on their heels as the girl, dressed in only a towel, stops her dance and taps her fingers together. Still sitting, Kozou palms his face. Still at the desk, Gendo's shoulders sag.

"I thought Rei was in the onsen," Ritsuko says.

"I…uh, I'm very fast?" Rei responds, stepping back and runs out the door.

"Why was she here?" Pieter asks, "And why in a towel? On second thought, I just don't want to know."

We second that motion.

"Right, yes," Yui says, and clears her throat as she resigns herself once again to her daughter's ability to appear where she shouldn't, "Junior, can you tell us anything about the remaining nine Angels?"

The hologram nods.

One is second to Father. One is the giver and taker of Life. One if the light of truth. One is Legion, for it is many. One is Fear. One is poetry. One is unknown, split in body and soul. One is the Void in which Father has been cast.

Kozou spit takes.

There is Us. And then there is the Lilim.

"Back up, Junior," Pieter says, "Lilim?"

Lilim is the final Angel. Combined with Lilith, you are like Father.

Behind his glasses, Gendo smirks and turns to Yui.

"I told you we'd be our final enemy. You owe me a Coke."

"Quiet, dear," Yui mutters, "Junior, how might the prior Nine react to these new Angels?"

None would ally with them. They are born of Rage.

"How's that different?" Ritsuko asks.

We were born of Father's first awakening. From fear, confusion, and pain. So we seek to reunite and become one with Father. Those that come now do not seek Complementation. They seek destruction. They are mad dogs. Mindless, dangerous, and to be destroyed.

So we have given them a name.

"Which is?" Gendo asks.

Cherubim.

"Like the Valentines Day cards?" Pieter asks, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Appropriate, Pieter," Yui responds, pushing her glasses up her nose, "But another meaning. Cherubim are the most powerful order of Angels."

"Second most powerful, Yui," Fuyutsuki corrects.

"Name still fits," Gendo adds, "According to Judaic mythology, Cherubim block the way to Eden."

Junior shifts, the hologram arcing its head up. The eyes shift to a horizontal configuration as the tendrils twitch and the maw inches open. Conversation dies as the image of the Angel makes a mournful, clicking sound.

"Junior?" Pieter asks, "What's wrong?"

One of the Cherubim is coming.

*

*

"Soooooooo anyway as it turns out we get internet access and we all started emailing Rei. And we thought, heeeee~ey we all want to meet our big brother but you know what? If it was all six of us, he'd be all 'Oh! Freak out!' and probably run and then he'd get locked in a closet and suffocate and die and then Ichi would be like 'GWAAAAR' eat us and then Mom would be really sad you know?"

Sitting across the table from her as she finishes off another ice cream cone, Shinji, Kana, Touji and Kyoko stare at Kiko as she dislocates her jaw to allow the double scoop waffle cone access to her throat. The four watch with varying expressions of horror, disgust, fascination, and confusion, and Touji closes his eyes and rubs the bridge of his nose.

"There ain't a *word* of that I understood."

"Aw, that's sweet," Kana says with a smile, elbowing Touji in the ribs, "You really just wanted to meet your big brother?"

Kiko nods with a toothy grin.

"Why haven't you met her before?" Kana asks, turning on Shinji and narrowing her eyes.

"Please, tell her," Kyoko says, rolling her eyes, "Let's give her a tour of *Terminal Dogma* while we're at it."

Shinji stares at Kyoko, and with a sight turns to Kana.

"It's…complicated," he says, "My Mom sent me to live with my aunt and uncle around when she took in Kiko and her sister's. So, we haven't had a chance to meet, yet."

"Aaaaaand we sort of drew straws or did rock paper scissors or knife fighted over it," Kiko adds, "It was me or Zyuu an' Zyuu really *reaaaaally* wanted to meet you. And. Stuff."

Sipping from her water bottle, Kyoko shakes her head and sighs. Grabbing her purse and bag, she pushes back her chair and stands.

"As much as I would love to listen in on this episode of the Hillbilly Ikaris," she says, "I am *busy*."

Kicking the chair back under the table, she walks off, shrugging her purse onto her shoulder. Turning to Touji, he shrugs and stands up.

"Touji, could you watch over Kiko for a few minutes?"

"Yeah, sure," Touji says, "I wasn't planning on seeing adulthood."

Kana elbows him in the ribs as Shinji walks off after Sohryu.

"Oo! Oo!" Kiko says, clapping her hands, "Rei told me about you! She set you up with your girlfriend, right?"

"Yeah," Touji says, scratching the back of his neck, "And…sort of… well, around when we helped her kill the Third Angel, to."

Kana stares at him. Her expression goes completely blank and he laughs, forced chuckles escaping his throat.

"You tell Dad and I'll kill you."

*

*

Muttering to herself, Kyoko turns and growls as she sees Shinji approach, folding her arms and leveling her gaze at the pilot as he stops in front of her.

"What do you need, Pilot?"

"I didn't expect to run into you today, Doctor Sohryu," he responds, "Especially around the stores."

"Believe it or not, Pilot," she says, examining the mashed bag of fruit, "Some of us have to do grocery shopping. Or at least try to."

He nods.

"Normally, I'd have Asuka do it like always," she says with a barely noticeable sigh, "But, as a Pilot, her time is too valuable to waste on menial tasks."

He nods.

"Have you asked her to do your shopping?"

She stares at the bag. Walking over, she dumps it into one of the trash bins.

"No," she says.

"Then I'll help," he says, "I do this all the time for Misato."

Before she can respond, they both turn to the sound of Touji's scream, just as he runs by with Kiko on his back, digging her heels into the ribs and urging on her new pony. Kana runs behind them, very softly telling them to stop with a smile on her face…and she stops. She looks up, as does Rei, as the first flakes begin to fall.

"It's…snowing," Kyoko says.

The first flakes fall on Kana's nose, the girl stepping back, the surprise evident on her face. The marketplace hushes, quiet falling over them as the first snowfall descends on Tokyo-3.

And then the ground shakes.

Someone screams.

And Shinji sees it clear the horizon.

*

*

ALERT.

AT FIELD DETECTED.

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED.

12TH ANGEL: CONFIRMED.

The snow falls in earnest. The mountains beyond Tokyo-3 have already become coated. Shinji stares at the antennae rising in the distance with the bird skull shape at the end of it, turning to the others to shout orders. He stops when he sees the look in Kiko's eyes.

"Big brother," Kiko slurs, "I dun fuhl gooooo…"

Her eyes rolls up, glowing before she falls onto her knees and begins foaming at the mouth.

"Kiko?!" Shinji yells, catching her before she can fall, "Kiko, what's

wrong?!"

"The exact reason they're not let out of Sheol," Kyoko growls, "Her S2 organ's unstable, and the presence of the Angel aggravates matters!"

She pulls Shinji off of Kiko, lowering the girl to the ground as she begins to convulse and whimper. With one swift motion, she opens the jacket, grabbing the shirt and opening it, popping buttons as she reaches into her purse and takes out a needle with an amber fluid inside the tube.

"Uri had a similar attack when he was twelve," she says, "It's a form of shock due to the body trying to en mass reject a large portion of itself. This is a best case scenario. If she became an Angel, we would all be dead."

One hand pins Kiko's wrists above her head and her other hand grips the syringe before jamming it into the girl's side. The amber fluid drains and the body stiffens before going limp. Kiko's eyes roll forward once more, the red glow ceasing before closing completely.

"Ikari," Kyoko says, "Get to NERV."

He freezes. Mouth open, staring at Sohryu and his sister as the snow falls around them, the area already evacuated save for them.

"We don't have time," Kyoko says, her tone slow and measured, "The Angel is coming, you need to get to Unit 01, and I will get the girl back to NERV. I know you do not like me and you have many good reasons for doing so, Ikari. But right now, you need to do your duty, *Pilot,* and go!"

Grimacing, hand curling into a fist, he gives them one last glance before running off towards NERV. The snow has begun to blanket the city. She closes the jacket around Kiko and picks her up, cradling the girl in her arms.

"Alright, I know you're here!" she yells, "Get us both to NERV-1, *now!*"

The bushes rustle, and shedding their leafy disguises, she smirks as the Section 2 agents appear.

-

-

-

-

-

You are, all of you, Garbage.

We shall burn the surface of this world until your carbon remains become like diamond glass.

I am the falling snow that buries you 'neath our contempt.

I am the winding chill of the wind as it strips your flesh from bone.

I am the Knight of God.

Angel of the Snow.

I am Shalgiel.

I am Here.

-

-

The lift doors open and Shinji runs out, running across the catwalk in front of Unit 02 and towards the lift to the elevators. The entrance he found near the markets was on the other side of the base from the lockers. Still, he can grab his A-10 connectors and pilot Ichi like he did against the Fourth if he has to…

"Shinji?"

He turns as the door to the lift opens. He forgets to stop, or at least the part of his brain that controls the feet shuts down for a moment and trips over the end of the catwalk and belly flops into the lake of LCL and Bakelite. Heels clap against the metal floor as she runs over, and he gets a good eyeful of Asuka's new plugsuit as he surfaces.

The entire suit is pink, dark red plates framing her waist and around her breasts, a NERV leaf symbol just under the collar. A wire frame comes up from the shoulders and loops around the back of her neck, her shoulders more obviously armored than the red, the wrists

sporting red piped displays with hologram displays floating over them.

She adjusts the buttons just under her bosom, turning the dial as the A-01 connectors in her hair glow, her hair pulled up into a loose ponytail and into a bob just above her shoulders, and she leans down and smiles.

"Are you alright?" she asks.

"Buh," he responds.

Something pushes underneath him. He rises from the water, the liquid draining around him and he finds himself sitting in the massive white palm of Unit 02, the eyes glowing dimply as Asuka smiles.

"Thank you, Zwei!"

A blast of steam answers her, as Shinji climbs off the palm and onto the catwalk.

"Your plugsuit's in the Cage with Ichi," Asuka says, "We're getting ready, so I'll see you out there, okay?"

He nods, dumbly. Walking with a definite gait to his step, he walks across the catwalks and into the next Cage over. Grinning, giggling, Asuka presses the button at the center of the plugsuit and the run around her head glows. Climbing up the ladders and to the Entry Plug, she climbs in, diving into the LCL and into her seat, belts automatically locking around her as numbers read past her face.

Hands wrap around the controls, the plug lighting up before becoming a view of the world outside.

"Okay, Zwei," she says, "Mobile C in C online. Dogma, t-this is Unit 02. Ready for sortie."

*

*

Long, slender legs touch the ground, and wherever they touch the frost comes over, freezing it in a hexagonal shaped, snowflake pattern. The ground gives way and cracks when the pointed foot leaves it, advancing to the next patch of ground as impossibly thin legs move it along the Base Earth in its advance.

The legs stretch nearly a mile above the earth, four at a common center, a disc painted like the sky supported by the spider like limbs upon which four red eyes stare out with an unblinking gaze, to the north, east, south and west.

It leaves snowflake scars in the ground as it advances, and the mountains near Tokyo-3 open up their crevices to reveal missile turrets and cannons. A hail of shells and warheads fill the air, as the center of the Cherubim's disc opens and a long black stalk rises, a bird skull shape at its end. It moves in a circle with loud ticks, the shells impacting against a wall of rippling orange light.

A red spike juts up behind the skull, and the two spin in opposite circules, becoming a blur of white and red before the eye facing the mountain glows.

Snowflake shaped craters sink into the ground in a straight line towards the emplacements, before the mountains shake, crack, and are finally consumed by a pillar of light.

*

*

"Well, that's new," Misato says, scratching the back of her head as she stares at the screen, "Hyuga, status?"

"All Evas are activated and ready," Makoto calls out, "Jet Alone online and ready for launch."

"Curious," Yui says, taking her station next to Misato, "It isn't heading toward Tokyo-3."

Raising an eyebrow, arms folded, Misato turns to the senior scientist.

"Look at its path," Yui says, the screen shifting to an overhead map view, "Its path will take it parallel to Tokyo-3. Sure, it can wreck the downtown, but it isn't heading to the heart of the city, and more importantly us. MAGI predicts that its actually heading north towards Tokyo-2."

"Larger population center," Misato says, and nods, "This Angel isn't after the Geofront, it just wants to kill as many people as possible. Is that it?"

Yui nods.

"Well then, let's get to work," Misato says, "Mana! How's the new attachment to Jet Alone working?"

"*Like a f__ing charm, Ma'am,"* Mana says, her grinning face appearing in the window next to the Big Screen, "*Operation: Lumberjack is go!*"

"We have three phases to this," Misato calls out, as the faces of the other pilots appear, "Asuka! Shinji! You're on Operation: K1 Climb. Get up to the Angel's core and take it out. Mana, you take down its legs. Rei, you're Operation: Crowd Control. Keep that thing coralled. Places, people."

New screens open, displaying the interior of the Cages as the cradles buckle and the rails light up.

"Evas launch!"

Chapter 29: Mountain Climbing

Something stirs, deep down. A beautiful dream of fire and light, of red eyes staring upon it as it first stirs. What is it, it asks. What *is* it? It does not know and yet this does not bother it. It does not care, only that the question grates at the back of its soul. What is it?

Is it a tool?

Is it a doll?

All it can think of are these questions, these statements, as the g-forces take over and it rockets towards the surface.

Inside of it, the girl laughs. Joy is in her voice.

What is it?

What am I?

-

-

Chapter 29: Mountain Climbing

-

-

"Unit 02's mobile CinC is active," Aoba calls out, "We are getting real time telemetry from Zwei's systems. Remote telemetry now beaming in from 01, 05, and Jet Alone Prime."

The doors to Dogma open. Ritsuko walks in, followed by a shakily walking Maya, still buttoning up the jacket of her uniform.

Yui watches the girl take her station, narrowing her eyes and turning slowly to Ritsuko.

"Kiko got out," Ritsuko whispers, leaning over to Yui, "She knocked Maya unconscious and stole her uniform before hiding her in my locker. With bows."

"I see."

Yui stares at her for a long moment, before palming her glasses and rubbing her nose.

"One of the Ree got out," she sighs, "Where is she now?"

"She…accosted Shinji, made her buy her ice cream, and they ran into Dr. Sohryu. Sohryu prevented an…attack…like we were worried about and is bringing the girl back to Sheol right now."

Yui's eyes snap open. Grabbing Ritsuko by the collar, she drops her glasses as her face turns pale.

"What?!" she screams, "What do you mean, she had an *attack?!"*

Letting go of Ritsuko, hands balled into fists, she spins on Misato as the rest of the bridge crew turn towards her. The sound of Dr. Ikari yelling is almost alien to them. The idea that she can lose her temper, even as she almost did during the ADAM attack and Unit 01's loss in the Dirac, easy gives them cause for alarm.

"Katsuragi!" she yells, "Take over!"

Flat heels click on the metal floor, and the doors close behind her as Yui exits Dogma.

*

*

"Special Weapon: Bunyan Progressive Chain Axe activated."

Behind her helmet, Mana Kirishima, Captain of the JSSDF, pilot of Jet Alone Prime, and girl with a healthy fixation on violence grins as the weapon as tall as Jet Alone rises in its hand.

Two hundred and fifty feet long, the reinforced length of the rod holds at its end a modified version of the Hammer, in its place a set of oversized rocket engines and a wide axe head with moving teeth along the edge.

The Rocket Propelled Chain Axe stands ready as Jet Alone Prime takes its first steps forward.

Behind it, the catapults reveal 01, 02, and 05, as the head of the Cherubim clears the horizon. Each inch of ground freezes as its four legs dip into the dirt. Around it, the wind whips and the coverings of

Jet Alone's optics frost over.

"*That is huge,"* Shinji says, "*Asuka, break right. I'll break left. Get to the highest peak you can find and try to get on the disc.*"

The red and purple Evangelions break off, speeding up the cliffsides as Unit 05 and Jet Alone watch the massive legs raise and descend. Inside the Entry Plug, Rei grins. A thought calls up the weapons console and she wills her steed forward. It is sluggish, though. Slow. Like it does not want to move or does not know how.

And then the cloud descends.

A white and blue cloud issues forth from Shalgiel, descending towards them and falling like snowflakes. Each flake hits the ground, pitting it.

"*That's not good,*" Mana says.

The ground begins to shake. Long tendrils shoot out from the earth, solidifying into long black legs as they grip the ground and begin pulling, rising as the small bird skull head clears the hole.

First a dozen, then two dozen. Miniature versions of Shalgiel rise from the ground, hissing and cackling through the eye-mouths covering their discs as they begin their run towards Mana and Rei.

"*Great,"* Mana says, JAP hefting up the Bunyan, "*Mooks, incoming!"*

*

*

The elevator ride to Sheol took an eternity from her perspective. Hands wringing, knuckles cracking, she paces the floor of the lift as the numbers tick down. Currently, she is almost to the Mantle of the Earth. That's how deep Sheol is. Far past anything sensors could ever pick up.

Their black secrets.

Her daughters.

The numbers tick down. The door opens. Shoes padding against the metal grate floor, Yui walks down the hallway, hands balled into fists. The doors open upon recognition of her, opening into the room of tubes and cylinders as she takes a PDA from the computer nearest the

door and wraps her hands around the small, blunt object.

Bent over the terminal in front of the cylinder in which the naked blue haired girl is floating, Kyoko Sohryu taps at the console and muses over the readings.

"How is she, Kyoko?"

Sohryu pauses, turns and regards Yui coolly, walking from the console and sighing.

"I presume that the unstable S2 organs make anti-rejection medication woefully inadequate to the task of stopping reactions?"

"You presume correctly," Yui sighs, staring at the floating girl, "I am surprised you know how to treat an attack like that, Sohryu. I usually believe that if one of the girls was out, unsupervised, there was the chance it could end in death. I'm relieved to see I was wrong."

Walking over, Kyoko closes the console, the cylinder fogging over as Kiko re-enters the cold sleep.

"Believe it or not, Ikari," she says, "Some of us can keep up with your genius."

Their eyes do not meet. Instead, Kyoko turns back to the console and stares at the data, stares at the cylinder and waits.

"Uri had a similar…episode when he was younger," she says, "He almost died."

Yui's grip on the PDA loosens.

"I…didn't know."

"Of course you didn't," Kyoko responds, "I don't tell people. If the Chairman knew, Uri would have been taken away from me. Besides which, I didn't know why he had that reaction…"

Closing the console again, she palms her PDA and shoves it into her jacket pocket.

"I had a needle labeled for just such an occasion," she says, "It was given to me by the Committee, when I was given Uri. I injected him, he recovered. I believed it was a food allergy of some sort, so, naturally, I blamed the girl. Ripped into her verbally. Life went on.

"I never asked why it happened. Never wondered what caused it. I was simply happy he was safe. Stupid of me as a scientist."

"As a scientist, yes," Yui sighs, "As a mother, no."

Kyoko sighs, nodding. Glasses folded in her hand, she rubs the bridge of her nose with a groan.

"So I made one good decision as a mother," she says, "Don't try to sugarcoat it, Ikari. I've f__ed up as a mother on every level save for emergency care. Both my children are healthy, but that is pretty much it. I have utterly *failed* at raising two children, and yet I see you with nine."

"Eight, Kyoko," Yui says, "Kihl took one of my daughters as collateral."

"Nine, Ikari," Kyoko responds, lips a thin line, "Asuka is more your daughter than mine, now."

Silence blankets the room. No sound, nothing save the steady beeps of the diagnostic equipment. Finally walking over, Kyoko squeezes Yui's shoulder.

"I will head to Dogma," she says, "And help direct the battle. Give you some time with your daughter."

With that, and not another word, Kyoko exits the room.

*

*

They click and clack their beaks as they charge, three dozen total at this point as they move like a great black and white and blue wave across the landscape. Throwing up dust, rocks, debris, the miniature Cherubim charge.

Rockets fire off and propel the axe as it cleaves through the first, knocking it aside as Jet Alone's arc cannons fire as she wades into the horde.

"*It's like Christmas!*" Mana screams, as Jet Alone grabs one by the face and crushes it, picking it up and swinging it by its neck into the crowd, "*And Chanukkah! And Kwanzaa! And What the Hell is Kwanzaa, anyway?!*"

Laser blasts and artillery slam into the mini-Cherub's ranks, Rei laughing at the controls of her war machine. At least, until the ground shakes and they are all sent flying from Shalgiel's blast, Jet Alone slamming into the frozen ground and falling through it while Unit 05 collapses before the swarm of Shalgiels.

"Oh, crap," Rei mutters.

And then they pounce, and there is darkness.

*

*

"Unit-05 has been disabled," Maya calls out, telemetry arcing next to Rei's picture, "Jet Alone Prime has lost contact. Unit-01 and Unit-02 are on advance towards the main Angel."

The doors slide open and Kyoko walks onto the bridge. Staring at the Big Screen, she purses her lips and walks over to Maya's console.

"What are those readings?" she asks.

"Core activity," Maya responds, staring at the screen, "Why?"

"Because…is it me, Ibuki…or does it look a little *too* active?"

On cue, the telemetry spikes and flashes red.

*

*

What am I?

The question repeats, over and over and over again.

New thoughts, new images.

Ideas.

Identity.

More than the sum of parts forms a whole.

Am I tool?

Am I a doll?

Am I a weapon?

Am I…

A heartbeat in red crystal. A thought taking form. A low growl that starts within the Core and rises up to its lips.

The Entry Plug glows red. Rei looks up, taps her fingers, and looks from side to side. Usually it's Ichi who goes apeshit, after all.

Of course. She would know. She gives it identity. She gives it thought. There is only one explanation for what she is.

ARE YOU A GOD?

Shrugging, Rei slaps off the restraints and stands on her seat. Mom has given her strict instructions on what to do if someone asks her if she is a God. More importantly, she has given her detailed instructions on what to do if her *Eva* asked her if she was a God.

"YES!" she cries, "Yes I am!"

Pointing towards the horde surrounding them, the interior of the plug glows blue.

"Now go forth, my minion! *Kill in my name!"*

The single eye on 05's brow lights up. The yellow visor over its eyes glow. The sky turns purple and with a pulse of its AT Field, the Eva sends the miniature Cherubim flying as it rises, locks around the jaw shattering.

*

*

"Rei's synchronization is at a *1:1 Ratio!* Unit 05's Core activity is going off the charts!"

Telemetry spikes as Maya looks up at the Big Screen. Sohryu's jaw opens as the Eva rears its head back, snapping open its jaw and roaring. A quick check of the cameras shows them the inside of the

Entry Plug, and Rei laughing maniacally.

"Has it gone berserk?" Misato asks.

"No," Sohryu responds, "This isn't like 01. This is a *Cold Berserker*. Ayanami's woken 05 up!"

*

*

It starts as a growl, all the way down in its Core. A rumble shaking the armored plates as the horde of miniature Angels rise to their feet, as the clawed feet of 05 dig into the soil and it throws back its head and roars. It is not the mechanical howl of Unit 01. It is not the screech of 00. It is a deep, guttural, rumbling roar, stretching the metal surrounding the mouth as the v-shaped visor over its eyes glow.

Snapping its mouth shut, 05 snaps out its left hand, folding back the claw into the cannon configuration as the Cherubim converge.

A blast of last vaporizes one. Head butting a second, shattering the bird skull head, Unit 05 climbs over it, leaping over the crowd and landing in a squat on all fours, turning with a growl as they form up and charge.

A blast of steam shoots out from the elbow of its right arm. The long red grooved drill begins to whir and turn, quickly becoming a blurred lance of red and yellow. Stepping one foot forward, it lunges, roaring as it swings its entire right side into the strike and impales the lead Cherubim on the drill, the miniature Shalgiel vibrating and shrieking before it explodes.

*

*

"Unit 01 and Unit 02 are at top speed. Asuka has uploaded tactical plan to MAGI and are moving into flanking positions at the Angel," Makoto calls out, "Contact reestablished with Jet Alone Prime! Continuing Operation: Lumberjack!"

*

*

The ground freezes as it advances, passing the outskirts of Tokyo-3 in its single minded march. The long pendulum of its neck swings in time with the sphere hanging beneath its disc, moving in time with its thin legs as it advances, blasting a path through mountains as it spots the movement of the Evangelions flanking it.

The red one, first. It can sense it is closer. It aims its eye, the head spinning as the ground in a straight line begins to buckle.

And the ground beneath Shalgiel cracks and breaks. Rising in a plume of smoke and pulverized rock, Jet Alone Prime's back rockets flare and it launches fist first into the lower sphere.

"*Wow, that's the worst design, like, ever! You know what I think?*"

Pulling back the axe, jump jets keeping the 35,000 tons of giant robot in the air, the torso disengages the locks and spins, the rockets of the axe firing as it propels itself at supersonic speeds and embeds its blade into the sack.

"*Spay and neuter your Angels!"*

*

*

One foot wraps its claws around a bird head, crushing it, slamming the miniature Angel into the ground as the drill bores through another two Angels. The AT Field around Unit 05 flares, pulsing and tossing aside the ones behind it, chain guns mounted underneath the chin firing and filling the air with flak.

Lasers carve the legs off two of the spawn, a plasma blast vaporizing one's disc as the Eva leaps, spinning in place and snapping its feet out like fists and striking several at once.

In the Entry Plug, grinning widely, Rei grabs the newly revealed joystick and thrusts it forward along the railing, rewarded by the drill shredding another Angel as she screams in delight.

"It's like a beautiful dream!" she screams, "I've lived my life for this moment!"

The holographic console flares to life. A large red circle hovers at the center, a word spelling out that makes Rei's grin stretch from ear to ear. As if her day could not get any better, she claps her hands together before slamming her fist onto the button.

Unit 05 leaps into the air. Its feet spin and convert to wheels, the legs folding in on themselves as the body folds open plates and the legs go flush against it and connect into a pair of axels.

The left arm spins inward, the claw folding against the back and converting into cannon mode, glowing, as the right arm folds up against the shoulders, the head folding inward as the drill stretches out, folding out into a larger drill.

The drill comes to life, spinning furiously as the cannon fires like a rocket, slamming the drill into the ground as Unit 05 disappears beneath the surface. The ground shakes as cracks form into a circle surrounding the spawn, herding them together as the whirring beneath them grows louder and louder.

The ground dips, falling into a crater, angel spawn slamming into each other in the confusion. Spider web cracks run the length and width of the crater and the ground surrounding it, a confused horde chattering as their heads spin.

Drill first, Unit 05 bursts through the ground beneath them. Gun ports and missile ports covering its shoulders, torso, and legs open up, as in the Entry Plug, Rei slams her hands against the weapon consoles.

"*Rei! Access the Dirac Armory and finish them off!*"

"No time, Dr. Akagi," Rei responds, grabbing the targeting helm behind her seat and pulling it over her face, "Unit 05! Use **Death Blossom!**"

Jets along its legs and arms fire, and the green Evangelion spins like a top. A hail of bullets, missiles and energy blasts fire into a spherical spray of flaming death.

One by one, the Horde explodes. A second sun ignites in the sky outside of Tokyo-3 as the Chariot unleashes a blossom of destruction that can be seen from the heights of the city in the distance.

This was not battle.

This was pest control.

*

*

The Cherubim reels, before its eyes glow and Jet Alone is sent into a nearby mountain. The wind whips up, bitter and loud, snow falling and frosting the ground as purple boots crunch the rock underneath it in a full on sprint. Shinji broke ranks first, dashing down the mountain side and running full speed towards Shalgiel, progressive knife drawn as 01 leaps the last distance and grabs onto Shalgiel's leg.

The material shimmers and breaks out into spikes, and pain shoots up his chest and stomach, Shinji grunting and grabbing the spikes.

"Well, thanks," he growls.

Jamming the heels against the spikes, grabbing the ones in at eye level, Unit 01 begins climbing.

"Asuka," he yells, "I'm starting my climb! Where are you?!"

Another blast in the distance, the wind whipping through his Eva's ears. He doesn't have time to dawdle, and less time to worry. Throwing itself up the hand holds, Unit 01 ascends, the legs shifting and moving as the purple speck climbs. The disc is huge, taking up his entire view, colored like the sky. The sphere swinging like a pendulum already bleeds LCL, and the Cherubim has slowed in its gait.

LILIM.

One of the eyes on the disc shifts, enveloping his view.

We know you, Lilim. We know of you.

"Crap," he mutters, willing Unit 01 to climb fast, "Come on, and just stay distracted. Asuka, where are you?"

You have accomplished NOTHING. You have only attracted the attention of those infinitely your greater, Lilim. You have only brought about Wrath.

The flesh of the disc shifts and lances out into razor edged tendrils.

Swearing, Shinji swings around and under the leg, swinging under the knee and climbing diagonally up the sheer surface as the Cherubim hisses and snarls.

Leaping, grabbing the swinging rod of the pendulum, he swears as it begins to sway violently, the Angel stopping and bending forward. The head swings down, the bird skull staring at him from upside down as it begins to spin.

"*Boom! Headshot!*"

The Bunyan embeds itself in the skull. Rockets dying down, the damaged Jet Alone releases the handle and falls, landing on its feet with the air of jump jets as the bird head shrieks, warbles, and explodes.

"*It's entering phase two! Shinji, hold on!*"

"Asuka?!" he yells, "Where are you?!"

The sphere swings, the legs breaking apart and the disc shattering as the pendulum swings up, switching places with the ruined head as the body reconfigures itself into a pair of ladder like legs resembling a DNA diagram and a skyscraper-like frame. Releasing the neck, Unit-01 drops down onto the reconfigured disc as the sphere sheds its black armor to reveal a red shifting Core, the AT Field around it pulsing and flash freezing the mountains around it.

Snow comes down in waves of blinding white. Jet Alone finds itself up to its knees, a localized cylinder of frozen water surrounding them as Unit 01's optics frost over…until he sees the blur of red.

Ascending the mountain at shoulder level of the Cherubim, Unit 02 leaps, hanging in the air, crossing half the distance to the Angel…and then its feet slam down on an orange field which it uses to launch itself the rest of the distance.

"*Shinji,*" Asuka says, her face appearing in his vision, "*I'm going to act as a brace. It's Core is vulnerable, so you have to take the shot.*"

"Sounds like a plan," he says with a grin, digging heels into the Cherubim's chest as Unit 02 lands next to him, "Ichi! Ready?"

Eyes glow. The plug glows blue.

"*Synchronization at 132%. Level 4 functionality unlocked. Access granted*

to the Dirac Armory."

Spikes shoot up around the perimeter of the Cherub's chest, closing in on them.

"*Accessing Triple Heavy Maser.*"

The two Evas leap off, Unit 02 wrapping its arms around Unit 01's chest, AT Field forming behind it to half the fall. Unit 01's hand snaps out, arms snapping out as the eyes flash white. Lines of white wrap around the right arm, the air warping as it snaps its right arm towards the glowing core. The lines turn into rifts, forming into metal plates surrounding the purple and green armor, latching together as the outlines of three barrels form around the hand and branch out into the trigger.

Plates surround the arm into a four leaf death blossom larger than Unit 01's chest, the three barrels spinning as a point of crackling electric light forms between the,

"Hold on!" he shouts.

Lines of blue and white run up the length of the cannon. Crosshairs form in Shinji's eye on the core, his right hand tensing as the view goes opaque.

The sky catches fire. From Tokyo-3, from Tokyo-2, they can see the burst of light as the beam lances out, going into and through Shalgiel's core and continuing out into the Pacific Ocean.

The Cherub screams, the Core boiling within its armor, vaporizing as yellow veins break the surface of its form, spraying out before the Core goes critical and Shalgiel disappears in a cross shaped explosion.

*

*

"Cherub has gone silent," Maya announces, "Telemetry received from Unit 01, Unit 02, and Jet Alone Prime. All pilots accounted for and unhurt."

The doors to Dogma open. Yui walks onto the bridge, arms folded as she stands next to Sohryu.

"What about Rei?" she asks.

"Unit 05 is returning to base," Maya responds, gaze flicking between Sohryu and Yui, "Unit 05's core activity has died down. We think it's gone back to sleep."

Yui nods.

"Very well," she says, "If you need me, I will be talking with the Commander. Sohryu, Katsuragi. The bridge is yours."

Turning on her heel, she walks out. Watching her go, Sohryu purses her lips, looking up past the doors and to the Commander's station on high, and finds it empty. Snorting, turning back to the Big Screen, she watches as the Evas descend back to their cages and Jet Alone back to its hangar. Arms folded, watching, her thoughts wander.

"And yet," she says to herself.

"And yet, what?" Misato asks.

Blinking, Kyoko turns to Misato. The two women stare at each other, Misato's eyes narrowed. For some reason, Kyoko's nose starts aching.

"Old thoughts," she says, turning back to the screen, "I am thinking I should look into Zwei access the Dirac Armory."

"Need to get Asuka's synch ratio high enough, first," Misato says, eyeing Maya and Ritsuko as they discuss Unit 05's telemetry data, "Right? You know, mental strain?"

A small flicker of a grin appears on the corner of Kyoko's mouth.

"She's a strong girl," Kyoko says, turning on her heel and walking towards the door, "She's a pilot. She can handle it."

*

*

The holographic map sputters to life. Time dilation photos of the Cherubim are layered over the map of the largest island of Japan, tracing the path of Shalgiel as it loops around Tokyo-3 and marches north. Gendo Ikari narrows his eyes as the door shuts, his wife having exited to inspect Unit 05, or 'Go-Kun' as it is better known.

At some point, he will have to go to the Cages himself. Unit 01 deserves some attention from him, if only because he's finding himself no longer hating it like he used to. Saving his son's life, and the world as well several times may be a reason why.

Or maybe it's something else.

Maybe he needs to speak with this 'Ichi'. Yui tends to take on children like Rei used to take in stray animals and bear cubs, and that conversation with Sohryu in Sheol about how Asuka is now more or less Yui's daughter would only be the latest in a line of surrogate children for Yui.

"What do you think?" Fuyutsuki asks.

"I think the Cherubim was not targeting Tokyo-2," Gendo says, "I think it had something else in mind."

The Angel's path loops. It is a series of half circles, one taking it around Tokyo-3 and another taking it around Tokyo-2 to the north.

"Let's assume it doesn't break off its pattern of movement to attack Tokyo-2, then," Kozou says, tracing the pattern. It repeats several times, avoiding cities and towns, until finally hitting the center of a particular area.

"Okayama?" Kozou asks, "Why would it target Okayama?"

Tapping the hologram, Gendo pulls his hand back, zooming in. Displayed in front of them now is a small house in the middle of nowhere in the countryside, and a large X to show that Shalgiel's rampage would have lead it there.

"Why would Cherubim target your brother in law?" Kozou asks.

"Not him," Gendo says, "Not exactly. And I think I know why."

*

*

"So, as far as we can tell, whatever imprinting Rei did on Unit 05 manifested during the battle," Maya says, walking with Ritsuko and Yui along the catwalks in front of the green and yellow Evangelion, "That's why it wasn't complete berserk. It was basically acting in a

manner similar to Rei."

"Rei with a drill and heavy weapons," Ritsuko says, "We can't just flash the Core, can we?"

"Go-Kun took out a good amount of miniature Angels," Yui responds, stopping in front of the Eva, arms folded and staring at it as the console nearest them turns off and Makoto and Aoba walk over, "Gentlemen, any anomalies?"

Scratching his head, Hyuga stares at his PDA and hands it over to Ritsuko.

"Core EKG activity's about the same as Unit 01," he says, "If Unit 01's any indication, that probably means Unit 05 is aware of its surroundings. So, I guess we're including it in the daily music treat."

"I'm thinking it's a hard rock fan," Aoba jokes, smile disappearing as Maya, Ritsuko, and Yui stare at him, "Sorry. Ma'ams."

"Well, at least it hasn't gone completely berserk," Yui sighs, "And if this is the extent of the problems we have with it, I think we're lucky. At very least, Rei did not have the sorts of problems with Go-Kun that she did with Unit 00. Right?"

"Right," Ritsuko responds.

"Right," Maya answers.

"**Right,**" Unit 05 booms.

The PDA drops to the floor. The two heads of Project E and three Bridge Bunnies turn to Unit 05 as it dips its head so its visor has clear view of them.

"**I'm sorry,**" it booms, "**Was I not supposed to take part in this conversation?**"

Chapter 30: Ladies Night

Leaning against the desk, his eyes dart between the droning teacher and the instant messenger conversation he currently is engaged in with his 200' tall mecha. Ichi is asking about whether or not she is pretty, and he honestly has no way to respond to her. Next to him, Asuka is working on a feasible alternative to the N2 engine implanted in Unit 05, and the clock is ticking towards dismissal.

The phone chirps as the minutes tick down. Thankfully, as a Pilot, he is allowed to use his phone in school. Opening it, he sees Asuka, Rei, and Mana doing the same. A block of text appears.

"Busy tonight," it reads, "Be nice to your babysitter. –Misato."

The phone chirps again as something honks in the parking lot.

"Really," it reads, "I called in serious favors. Be. Nice. –Misato."

Metal grates on metal. Looking out the window, a black car drives into the parking lot, taking off a tail fender from a car as its reverse light flash on and it swings towards an empty parking space, taking out the brake lights of another parked car before squealing out the tires and crunching a third cars trunk.

"That's the worst parking I've ever seen," Shinji says, "It's worse than Misato's."

"Is that M-Mr. Kaji," Asuka asks, leaning over his shoulder as the car finally comes to a rest and slams the door into another cars side, "He d-does drive…well, badly."

The police cars have already lined up around the parked car. Officers have their guns out, pointed at the driver…and everyone blanches, stepping back and pointing their weapons skyward as the driver steps out.

Asuka's eyes go wide. Shinji's jaw drops.

And Gendo Ikari, Supreme Commander of NERV, clicks on the alarm for his car before walking into the school.

*

*

Two hours earlier.

Hands tented in front of his face, amber lenses reflecting the dim light behind him, the Supreme Commander of NERV stares at his tactical ops commander and waits. Misato shifts from heel to heel. Clearing her throat, hands folded behind her, she decides to get it out of the way.

"What do you need, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"Well, Commander, several of the female staff of NERV and myself, including Dr. Ikari, are going to be going out tonight. Normally I would ask Agent Kaji for this, but he is currently busy feeding the JSSDF what we're letting them know about the Cherubim, and Sub Director Sohryu is out of the country and…well, Sub Commander Fuyutsuki…wasn't receptive…"

"I see…"

"And I really wouldn't trust Lieutenants Makato or Aoba with this sort of responsibility, Commander," Misato continues, clearing her throat, "So…we need you to…"

"Babysit."

"Thank you, Commander," Misato says with a nod, "I…really don't think I could have said that, myself."

The phone rings. Pressing the speaker button, Gendo resumes his typical position.

"Yes?"

"*You're doing this, Gendo."*

"Yes, Yui."

He clicks the button to turn it off, then turns back to the financial reports.

"Well, okay," Misato sighs, "Since Agent Kaji is busy, this also includes Captain Kirishima. So, you'll be in charge of all of them, sir. You'll pick them up from school this afternoon and…Dr. Ikari just wants me to pass on to you that this should be as normal as possible."

He turns to her, leveling his gaze.

"I can do…normal."

-

-

Chapter 30: Ladies Night

-

-

The Tokyo-3 Bar and Grill is widely considered the best eating establishment in the Tokyo-3 city limits, and therefore easily accessible to those working for NERV. Normally, reservations are made well in advance. Their reservations were made an hour ago, under the name Dr. Ikari.

Hence, the table by the window where the women now are, on their third glass of wine and laughing hysterically.

"So," Yui explains, swirling the half empty glass in her hand, "We finally gave in and told Rei should could adopt a pet. Now, we get called away to meet with the Chairman and Kozou babysits, and that's when we found out Rei went out into the woods and found a *bear cub*. That was the *last time* Kozou babysat for us, and I think that's when he started drinking."

"Explains why he's the only guy at NERV who can drink me under the table," Misato says with a smirk, draining her glass, "I find it hard to see the Sub Commander as a babysitter, but if he baby sat Rei, his retirement is well earned."

"I baby sat Rei, to," Maya points out.

"Yes, but you have siblings," Yui points out, "You have experience. We basically forced Kozou to babysit for us."

"Speaking of which," Ritsuko adds, leaning on Maya's shoulder and having switched up her wine for brandy, "Misato, am I to understand you convinced the *Commander* to babysit the pilots tonight? How'd that work out?"

"It worked out because I told him to," Yui says with a deadpan straight face.

Which only causes them to break out into another round of laughter.

*

*

In the passenger seat, Commander Gendo Ikari sits with a perfectly calm expression, staring serenely out the car's windshield. In the seat behind him, Mana Kirishima has an ear to ear grin on her face and is cheering. Next to her, Asuka and Shinji are screaming, arms wrapped around each other.

"RAMP!"

The black sedan launches, wheels spinning as it flies over the traffic on the expressway, landing on an empty car carrier.

"Alright! I wanted to do this since I saw *Knight Rider!"*

Pushing the gear into reverse, the car slides off, sparks flying off the rear bumper as she shifts it back into gear and sends it tires squealing into traffic. Gendo calmly wraps a hand around the door handle, his face blank.

"Signal," he says.

The car swerves through two lanes of traffic, speeding up as it hits the exit ramp and flies down the entrance to the local streets. The apartment building looms in the distance, and throwing back her head, Rei starts to cackle, spinning the steering wheel and causing the car to donut while still moving forward and into the speed bump in front of their parking lot.

The momentum and ramp effect of the speed bump launches the car into the air, spinning end over end as Asuka and Shinji scream, Mana whoops, and Rei laughs as the car flies over the other parked cars and lands on its tires with the screen of ripping rubber and bent metal.

"Like. A. Glove," Rei purrs, and turns off the engine.

"We're home," Gendo says, and unbuckles his seatbelt.

Climbing out of the seat, he opens the door and opens the back door, Mana hopping out and turning to find Shinji and Asuka passed out in the seat.

"Playing matchmaker, sir?" she asks.

"If anyone asks, yes," he responds, pushing his glasses up his nose, "Right. Now we must choose dinner."

*

*

"Now, of course," Misato says, raising her shotglass as she has traded up wine for whiskey, "The most important part of our sojourn tonight. Men."

"Here, here!" the other women shout.

The three new arrivals at the table nod in agreement, Aoi Mogami raising her glass first, half leaning on Ritsuko.

"Do keep in mind," Yui slurs, "Some of us are married to the men on your list."

"Thank you for offering, Doctor," Misato says with an ear to ear grin, "So, ladies. Scale of one to ten. Commander Ikari."

"It has to be a positive number?" Kaede asks.

Ritsuko throws back her head and laughs.

"Well," Maya starts, cut off as Ritsuko continues laughing, slamming against the table as she almost falls onto Maya. Yui purses her lips, staring at Akagi, Misato swirling her shotglass as Ritsuko slowly but surely calms herself.

"Well," Maya continues, "I wouldn't say he's…attractive."

"The beard kills your soul," Satsuki adds.

"He looks like my creepy uncle," Kaede says.

"Really unsteady ground," Yui says, smirking behind her wine glass.

"Does make us wonder," Misato responds, leaning back in her chair, "What exactly possessed you to take his name?"

One eyebrow raises as Yui sets down her wine glass and grins.

"Who ever said I took his?"

The table goes silent. Crickets chirp in the outside background. Maya's jaw hangs open as Ritsuko reaches over and gently shuts it.

"Next month," Yui says, swirling her wine glass, "Will be the twenty year anniversary of myself and Gendo. Rokobungi."

"Dear Lord," Ritsuko says, "The Commander's even more whipped than we ever believed."

"He is," Yui says, swirling her wine glass, "And in a good way. He's romantic, he does everything I ask, and he's completely devoted to me. Honestly, if something happened to me, I don't think Gendo could dress himself in the morning. Moving on. Am I the only one who sees Agent Kaji and thinks, 'Use that ponytail like a leash?'"

*

*

As it turns out, the car was 'Rei-inforced.' That meant it was structurally reinforced and armored to the point where NERV had Unit 00 punt it. If it was not damaged when it landed, it was fine for Rei to drive.

This does not assure Asuka in the slightest. Once she and Shinji had regained consciousness, she excused herself to the nearest place to lie down and rest, and as this is the Ikari's apartment, there was one major place.

The walls are bright pink, lined with blue stripes. The pillow of the bed is concealed by a pile of stuffed teddy bears, puppies, and kittens which nearly reaches the ceiling.

So this is Rei's bedroom, she thinks, tip toeing into the room and staring at the bed. The bed is large enough that she still lie down on it without moving the animals. Her bed back in Berlin was larger.

No stuffed animals there, though. She only really needed her doll.

"Mm," she sighs, "L-let's see…um…it's nice?"

There is an LCD television hanging on the wall in front of the bed. A nice desk is next to the bed, and the carpet is plush, oozing between her toes. It is a nice bedroom. For someone as…chaotic as Rei, it seems almost odd she would sleep somewhere so tranquil.

A small smile crosses her lips. Maybe…but she shouldn't, she thinks. There's the closet right on the other side of the room. Curiosity overtakes her. This really is too…girly. Rei has to have some skeletons in her closet, after all.

Tip toeing across the room, she walks to the closet, a smile crossing her face. What is in there, she thinks? Pictures of boys, maybe. Magazines she isn't supposed to have. Maybe a big mess she shoveled in there because she knew she was going to have guests. Seizing the handle, she turns it and swings the door open.

*

*

The shriek echoes through the apartment. Rei's ears perk up, and she takes off with a leap off the couch. Standing in the kitchen, Shinji and Gendo stare towards the direction of Rei's bedroom as Mana exits the bathroom, closing the panel on her right arm.

"What does Rei keep in her room?" Shinji asks.

"I've often been curious," Gendo responds, "After ten years, I've learned to stop looking."

*

*

Her face is on the level of the red Core. The three fingered hands are on her shoulders. Looking up, still screaming, Asuka locks eyes with the bird-skull like face of the Fourth Angel, Sachiel, as it holds her on the spot upon her disturbing its resting place of the Closet.

In the panicked recesses of her mind, she is not sure what is terrifying her more; the sudden motion of the dead Angel upon her opening the door or the fact that Rei *keeps one in her closet.*

"Oh, him. I killed him right around the time you arrived," Rei says, skipping into the room, "Whataya think?"

Asuka continues screaming, hands balled together as the death grip of the miniature Angel holds her in place.

"Well, then I had him stuffed. And mounted. And I installed hydraulics

in his arms so he'd sort of jump anyone who looked in my closet. And stuff."

More inarticulate screaming. Sighing, Rei walks over, pulling the hands off of Asuka and kicking the Angel back into the closet, closing it. Face red, eyes wide, Asuka stumbles back, Rei handing her a paper bag to hyperventilate in as Shinji peaks his head in.

"Is everything all right?"

Asuka rocks back and forth on Rei's bed, bag inflating and deflating.

"Rei," he says, staring at the blue haired girl, "What happened?"

"Asuka looked in my closet," Rei says, "I have stuff in my closet. Weird stuff."

He stares at the closet door. Narrowing his eyes, he walks towards it. Or he tries to, finding himself locked in place when Asuka grabs him by the belt, shaking her head as the bag continues to inflate and deflate.

*

*

"How about this?"

"Too complicated. You'd need way too many ingredients, and besides which it's only the five of us. Why do you even know how to make Jumbalaya for fifteen people?"

Gendo stares at her. Sighing, Mana nods.

"Right," she says, "I've seen Rei eat."

Flipping to the next page of the gourmet cookbook, he muses over the next recipe. Many of these recipes involve some level of slow cooking. He would start it when he left in the morning, and it would be ready by the time he and Yui arrived home. However, it is already almost dinner time.

"Very well," he says, "Plan B."

"What's plan B, sir?"

He takes out his PDA, tapping the screen to list a series of contingency plans with Section 2.

"Plan B," he says, and taps the display, "Execute."

An affirmative from Section 2 on the other end, the screen lighting up to show the face of the target.

"If I may ask, sir," Mana says, "Did you actually have this planned out when Katsuragi convinced you to babysit?"

He stares at her. Nodding, she sighs.

"Right," she says, "Forgot who I'm taking to."

*

*

The black bag is pulled off. Glasses crooked and fogged, Hyuga Makoto's eyes dart from side to side, finding the tied up and gagged Shigeru Aoba in the chair next to him. Standing in front of him, the black suited Section 2 agent stares at them, adjusting his sunglasses and clearing his throat.

"What the Hell?" Hyguga asks, "What's the meaning of this?!"

"Your place isn't to ask questions, Lieutenant Makato," the agent says, his voice methodical, stressing every syllable, close cropped receding brown hair smoothed back as he adjusts his tie, "It is only to follow… orders."

Pulling the chair over, the Agent sits down, slowly and methodically as another one, identical save for his hair being black, enters the room.

"As is our place," the Agent says, "When we were given the orders to pick up you and Lieutenant Aoba, we did not question them. When we were given the orders to place a ball gag in Lieutenant Aoba's mouth and play banjos until he soiled himself, we did not question them. When we were given the orders of what to do with you, we did not question them. The machine, Lieutenant Makato, breaks down if the cog questions his place."

"What are you going to do to me?" Hyuga demands.

The Agent smiles.

"The Commander has an order you are to carry out, Lieutenant Makato. A…mission…if you will that he placed priority on. Do you understand your place in the machine, Lieutenant Makato? Or will you keep questioning, as Lieutenant Aoba did?"

Hyuga glances over. Eyes wide, Shigeru shakes his head, drill dripping down his chin, a choked scream through the grooved ball in his mouth.

"What do you want me to do?" Hyuga asks, shoulders slumping.

The Agent smiles. It is a forced, unnatural thing, his smile. Like he had just figured out how the facial muscles work.

"Excellent choice, Lieutenant Makato," he says, "Your vehicle is waiting. Now, you must hurry, Lieutenant Makato."

The Agent leans in, lips inches from his ear.

"Or the pizzas will get cold."

Hyuga's eyes snap open. He turns, staring at the Agent as the bonds release.

"Just…pizza delivery?"

"Yes," the Agent responds, "The gourmet pizza place the Commander prefers does not deliver."

"…you kidnapped us. You tied us up. You tortured Aoba…so I would agree to *deliver pizza?*"

The Agent nods.

"Are you *shitting me?*"

*

*

"So, now that we're off the subject of Kaji's ass as a stress toy," Misato says, half hanging off the chair, swirling about a cup of iridescent blue liquid, "Is it me, or does Sub Commander Fuyutsuki get a disproportionate amount of ass?"

"He's compensating," Yui slurs, one arm around Ritsuko's shoulders as Maya stares daggers, "He abuses his authority beautifully."

"I think he's slept with nearly every female staffer at NERV," Satsuki slurs, "Hey, Aoi! What regulation's that?"

"5728.91. If you ain't married, you're fair game."

"Kozou was my advisor in college," Yui says with a laugh, "The amount of emotional blackmail I have on him is staggering. And sometimes I think I'm the sole woman in NERV who hasn't slapped that leathery old ass. Am I?"

"He never hit on me," Maya says.

Aoi laughs.

"There's a reason for that, sweetie," she says, patting Maya on the shoulder.

"Moving on," Ritsuko says, "I'm pretty sure I'm gay, but am I the only one who wants to f__ Sohryu?"

"Please tell me you mean the Sub Director," Misato sighs.

"I wouldn't f__ Kyoko Sohryu with someone else's dick," Ritsuko slurs, "Of course I mean him."

"Well then," Yui says, raising her glass, "Were I not married or if Gendo was a complete and utter monster, I'm pretty sure I'd be sampling the German wares. Does take a certain type of man to knock an Angel unconscious with a door."

*

*

The four full pizza pies arrived, and Shinji could have sworn he recognized the delivery boy. But no. That couldn't have been Lieutenant Makoto dressed up as a Dominoes delivery boy. That wouldn't make any sense.

"A tip, Commander?" the delivery boy asks.

"Don't question orders," Gendo says, and closes the door.

Back in Rei's bedroom, Asuka finally releases the paper bag, handing it back to Rei. The television beeps, Rei clapping her hands together and squealing.

"Alright!" she yells, "Conference call!"

Pulling out the remote, she clicks on the tv. Six pairs of red eyes stare back, Asuka's eyes going wide as they center on her.

"*HI, ASUKA!"* the Ree shout.

Squeaking, Asuka freezes, Rei handing her another paper bag.

"Rei," Shinji says, entering the room, "The pizza's here and-"

"*BIG BROTHER!"*

Six identical faces mash against the screen. Shinji screams, scurrying back, tripping over the bed and falling with Asuka into the pile of stuffed animals.

*

*

Mana and Gendo stare at Rei's bedroom and the screams coming from within.

"Never a dull moment, is there, sir?"

"I got used to it after ten years."

*

*

Her steps are unsteady, wandering back and forth as she stumbles to the coat rack. The mess of brown hair is there, and she smiles, licking her teeth, more than enough wine in her system propping up her courage as Maya Ibuki enters the coat closet behind her. There she is, Maya thinks. This is *perfect.*

"Sempai?"

She turns, startled and giggling, as utterly and completely trashed as

herself. The two start laughing in their inebriation, leaning against each other.

"Ain't this fun?" the other slurs.

"Oh, it's peeeeerfect," Maya laughs, "Sempai…I'm *hammered.* An ya know what?"

"What?"

"I wanted ta do this for *sooooo* long."

The alcohol tells her to go for it. So she does. And she grabs her by the front of the blouse and mashes her lips against hers.

*

*

Hands folded in front of his mouth, Gendo Ikari surveys the table before him, the arranged tomes of knowledge and secrets. The Children are assembled, and it is Rei and Asuka's friend, Horaki, who will lead the proceedings, while he supervises. Like he always does.

"Okay, Rei, roll your character."

The dice falls where it may. The Children stare at it, and Horaki raises an eyebrow at Rei.

"Rei, that means your character has a charisma of 5," she says, "She's going to be…socially awkward."

"What in God's name is she?" Shinji asks.

"She's a Green Sun Princess Jedi Monk Inquisitor," Rei says, "Weee~ell, what I was going to do was take Scourge as my caste, then kinda take Khorne as my favored, so I could be awesome and silent and run around and make people explode like nuclear bombs and create a demon city made out of razor wind and screams that keeps on movin'. And stuff."

Gendo raises an eyebrow. He's getting the feeling Yui isn't going to be *happy*.

"Was Exalted 40K really the best idea for a tabletop game?" Shinji asks.

"Do *you* want to see what Rei's idea for a DnD character looked like?" Hikari responds.

"Done!" Asuka announces, holding up her paper, "I'm a Dawn Solar. Shinji?"

"Alchemical," he says, "Um…okay. Ready to begin."

*

*

Somewhere between the next round of drinks, Misato switched to a liquor that started to glow. The devil on her shoulder was larger now and taking food orders, while Ritsuko was swaying back and forth in her chair and they had somehow changed locations from the high class restaurant table to the dance floor and the karaoke machine.

For some reason, she finds it hilarious that Ritsuko is singing 'It's Raining Men.'

*

*

"I am Rei Ayanami! Paladin of the Solar Emprah! Kneel before Him or be destroyed!"

"Asuka, you attack the Outsider with your Chainsword Nunchucks. Roll for damage."

The dice slams on the table.

"Well, I think it exploded," Hikari deadpans.

"Damn straight it did," Asuka growls, "I crit that SON OF A BITCH!"

Shinji stares at Asuka, shifting slightly to the side. In the hour the game has been going on, Rei has changed classes twice, Asuka has been swearing more and more, and his father has introduced himself into the game as a traveling bard NPC. Somewhere along the line Mana found the supplemental book on adding weaponry and joined in as a Warforged.

"Roll for initiative," Hikari says.

"F__ initiative!" Asuka cries out, "The Great Asuka Langely Sohryu charges those demon-hooved sons of bitches!"

"Sweet Zombie Jesus! I just found a gun with a damage code that wraps around the page!"

"That's nice, Mana."

Hand over his face, Shinji listens. He just listens as his father begins disputing rules with Asuka on why she has to roll for initiative, while Asuka gets louder and louder and skirting those same rules. They are going *pay* for this at the next synch test, Shinji tells himself.

"Okay, Asuka, you charge ahead and the demon casts Ground-To-Water. You're drowning."

"Air is overrated!"

The door swings open. Waving to the pilots, Aoi walks in, Yui's arm over her shoulder, hanging off her as the head of Project E continues singing something not fit for print much less the ears of teenagers. Sighing, Gendo rises, walking over past empty pizza boxes to help his wife over to the couch.

"Thank you, Commander," the designated driver Bridge Bunny says, "If you'll excuse me, the other ladies are passed out on my back seat."

"Rei, why are you using 'seduction' on Shinji's character?" Hikari asks.

"Did I crit it?"

"No."

Yui starts laughing, stretching out on the couch.

"Well, we can continue this later," Hikari sighs, closing her book, "It's late, and I've got school tomorrow. What about you?"

"Special program at NERV," Mana responds, "We're testing out the new VR simulator. Tell Ken, watch him drool."

Shinji helps her pack up the books, Asuka tapping her fingers together as her expression softens and her shoulders stretch and roll. Finally, she gathers the papers and character sheets, handing them to Hikari with a smile.

What was that, she asks herself, she *liked* being brash and loud and

brazen…

"Gendo," Yui slurs, "As your commanding officer, I am ordering you to remove your pants."

"Children present," he responds, "Rei, take care of the rest."

The two disappear into the next bedroom. Hikari has already left, Mana flopping onto the couch and quickly falling asleep, tapping her fingers on her hand to the rhythm of her snoring.

"Okey-doke," Rei says, "I'll set up the mats in my room. Soooooooo who wants the bed?"

"I'll take a mat," Shinji sighs, "Rei, I have a question."

"Mm hm…"

"If you keep a dead Angel in your closet, where do you keep your clothes?"

The door swings open.

"Hey, kids!"

Smile on her face, chirp in her step, Misato enters the apartment with a grin. Opening her mouth, she raises a hand, ready to relay the details of her night.

And then collapses in a head on the table.

"Is she glowing?" Asuka asks.

"Ooooo night light!"

Mana snores in responds, flipping onto her side on the couch. Sighing, Shinji hefts up his guardian and carries her into the bedroom, followed by Rei. Sitting on the floor in front of the table, Asuka sighs, tapping her fingers together.

That *was* fun.

Being another person.

The rush, the pretend power.

She wonders if she'll be able to do that in the VR tomorrow. But,

that'll wait until tomorrow. She should turn in, after all. Long day ahead, as always.

"The Great Asuka Langely Sohryu," she says to herself with a smile.

She likes the ring of that.

Chapter 31: Virtuality

I am.

Through License of he who is called "I AM" I have come.

Though my feet must stomp upon the Base Earth for this blessed quest, I have come.

I am the first of the many.

I am the Harbinger of your destruction.

I am the Covering of God.

Angel of Water.

I am Sachiel.

I have come.

*

*

The Fourth Angel stomps through the streets of Tokyo-3, eyes in the recesses of its bird skull mask glowing as cross shaped explosions litter the district, three toed flat feet leaving impressions big enough to park a truck in along the streets and parks.

The gems upon its palms glow, lances of energy slamming into the ground, stopping at the armor layer, a warbling cry coming from the creature as it stops, growls, and turns as the alarms blare and it… senses something.

The Shadow, it senses.

The Shadow has come. The mockery that the Lilim have created to face it is here, and…

Two rails shoot up. With a crackle of electricity, the cradle lurches to a stop on the surface. The Evangelion falls forward, lurching as the

locks around it release, raising its head as it stares down the Angel…

And four feet slam down as Unit 05 brings up the drill.

"*VR Program's online, Rei. Show us what you can do."*

In the Entry Plug, Rei Ayanami claps her hands together and squeals, grabbing the butterfly controls and willing Go-Kun into a charge.

Locks around the mouth release and Unit 05 roars, barreling down the street, shoulder checking Sachiel and carrying them both into the next district. A point blank cross shaped blast sheers off one of the shoulder pylons, Go-kun roaring in pain and anger, head-butting Sachiel and caving in the bird skull face.

A picture folds out in Rei's eye.

"*Should I be embarrassed by how much better Rei is doing against the Angel than I did?*" Shinji asks.

Mana's image folds out next to his.

"*Yes. Shamed, to. I think the next step is for you to commit seppuku. I'll get the sword."*

Misato's face folds out next.

"*Mana, not funny. Rei, finish him off!"*

Sachiel lurches around blindly, its eyes somewhere in its spine at this point. In the Plug, Rei laughs, eyes glowing in tune to her Evangelion as the A-10 connectors flare to life. Her left hand rises. In tune with her, so does Unit 05's claw, revealing the plasma cannon as its v-shaped visor glows.

"Go-Kun! Finishing strike!"

The focusing crystal flashes blue, feet bracing on the street.

"This hand of mine glows with an awesome POWER!" Rei shouts, "It's burning grip tells me to defeat you! SHINING-"

With a roar, Unit 05 charges, slamming the left hand and cannon into Sachiel's core.

"*FING-AAAAHHH!!!"*

The recoil of steam shoots out the left elbow as the cannon discharges, vaporizing Sachiel's core as the fingers grip the chest and raise the Angel above Unit 05 as it detonates. The shock wave buffets the city, the blast released upwards as two rivers of blue iridescent liquid pour down the armored face of the Evangelion.

In Central Dogma, standing by the Commander's side, Kozou Fuyutsuki slaps his hand on his face as the simulator ends.

"I'm reasonably sure the Americans did not design Unit 05's plasma cannon to be used like that."

Standing next to him, Pieter Sohryu shrugs.

"I'm pretty sure anything Ayanami does isn't designed to work like it does on paper."

-

-

Chapter 31: Virtuality

-

-

Alarms blare. Cut from their debriefings and the buzz of the VR systems deactivating the four pilots grip the controls of their mechas, the eyes of their giants glowing as the computerized voices chime off data which only one of them really understand.

"*Blue pattern's been detected, kids,"* Misato says, face appearing in their field of vision, "*Evas launch!"*

The cradles shudder and launch, sending the mechas careening upwards, each one emerging at a different corner of the fortress city. Popping open the shoulder pylon and drawing the progressive knife, Asuka scans the city, nothing out of the ordinary standing out. Could it be invisible, she asks herself.

"*I see them…how many are there?"*

"Nine."

Nine shapes, vaguely humanoid, spread white wings as they circle the city. Long faces split into toothy grins, each one summons to their

hand a black double sided sword, holding it by the handle running down the middle.

"Are those…Evangelions?" she asks.

Her response is three blades turning into lances, impaling Unit 05 before its core goes critical and it explodes, blinding Asuka as the explosion rips through half the city, throwing up smoke and debris as Mana screams in her ear.

"*God dammit,"* Misato yells, "*Everyone, evasive maneuvers! The Eva Series has gone berserk!"*

Jet Alone is slices down the middle, the spear going through the cockpit. She watches as Unit 01 takes two lances through the Entry Plug and Core, going silent. She hears Dr. Ikari screaming swears, hears Misato screaming, and looks up in horror as one blade comes down right towards her-

*

*

"What do you mean, *the simulator's locked us out?!"*

"That's exactly what I'm saying!" Maya shouts, swinging her seat around and locking eyes with Misato, "There's some sort of feedback loop from the VR program that's stopping us from detaching the A-10 connectors! That means the Pilots are locked into the simulators, and we. Can't. Get. Them. Out!"

"Shouting at each other isn't going to get anything done," Ritsuko sighs, rubbing her temples, "We need to figure out why the VR program isn't disconnecting. The LCL can sustain the bodies indefinitely, but if the theories are correct, right now their minds are inside the MAGI."

Folding her arms, she stares at the Big Screen, tapping her foot. The last words were bitten out, she knows. It's not like she resents the MAGI, after all. It was her mother's finest work.

"I have the most experience with the MAGI," she says, "Katsuragi, you're ceding command of this operation to me. Maya, run full diagnostic. I'm taking Aoi with me and we're going to get an inside look at the systems."

Heels clapping on the metal floor, she walks out with a snort. After all, she thinks, this can't be worse than a computer glitch. Right?

*

*

The alarm clicks on, beeping with unholy fury as she opens an eye, propping herself up on her elbow before slapping her palm against the snooze button with a snort. Flopping down onto the bed, she rolls onto her back and stares at the ceiling, blinking the sunlight out of her eyes before snorting and sitting up.

"Mana? Honey? Time to get ready for school!"

"I heard ya, Mom," Mana Kirishima mutters, swinging her legs over the side of the bed, balancing on her heels and trotting across her bedroom.

Morning goes in a blur. A quick shower is followed by a running breakfast and a race along the city streets to school, where her classes and more importantly her friends await.

Uri is there to great her, smiling that almost disinterested smile that sort of tells you he doesn't give a damn but really does. Shinji gives him a dirty look, before turning back to Mana with a smirk and a not. Touji on the other hand, doesn't notice her either way, but she's not remotely interested in that dumb god damn jock, so it works for her either way.

Except for those damn menus that keep popping up whenever they talk with her. And each time, the last option's always 'stick it in.'

*

*

Well. That's a nice start for her. Let's let her stew for a bit.

The door to the office slams open, gaining her attention as he walks in. Eyes clear as crystal motions conveying pure, raw power behind

them, Pieter Sohryu enters the office of his ex-wife, one of the three heads of Project E. She narrows her eyes as she stands. He balls his hands into first, pushing aside the desk as their eyes meet, a small snort from the back of his nose the only sound.

And she grabs him by the lapels of his uniform jacket, pulling him close and mashing her lips against his. His arms wrap around her and tighten like a vise, picking her up and` slamming her, pinning her to the back of the office, moaning through the kiss as her nails screech down the wood surface.

"One month anniversary?" she breathes.

"'I'm God Damned transparent, I know," he growls, Not to mention that I've always wanted to do this…"

Spins her around, braces her hands against the wall. She grits her teeth and growls as the back of her uniform skirt is lifted up, growling turns to panting as she feels his fingers beginning their ministration, and-

Sparks fly from the monitor. Both of them duck, quickly fixing their clothes as a hole half its size melts through the LCD.

"Well, that's not good," he says.

*

*

`The sun is shining, the birds are singing, and once more there is a giant monster on the loose. The thing resembles a floating fish with two eyes on the side of its head and tentacles shooting out of its flat maw. It is the frequency of things like this happening that prevent the streets from going into a full scale panic instead of a relaxed evacuation. Several people have even stayed behind. They know a show is coming.

"Monster!"

The beast turns, leveling its eyes upon the creature. It resembles a teddy bear, colored red and green, hands and feet white and four green button eyes set on its face.

"Monster, I am Zwei! You have entered the world protected by my

Master! She gives you one chance to leave this world, or you shall face the consequences."

The monster snorts. Throwing upon its maw, it shows off a virtual tunnel of blades hooked into flesh. A terrifying vision to most, true.

But Zwei has seen the worst these monsters have to offer. And besides which, his Master will save him.

"Zwei! Pull back!"

The teddy bear blurs, disappearing as the beast snaps its mouth shut, just as one of the civilians, a school girl with red hair and blue eyes and with an unusual wrist watch leaps off the building.

"Alexstrazha! *Full Drive!*"

A nimbus of flame surrounds her, becoming something shining like a newborn sun. Inside, her clothes turn to vapor, replaced by armor of red steel, skin tight and flexible, body hugging yet revealing nothing. The hair clips in her hair become two baubles, a green gem on her chest and outside of her palms glowing with emerald light.

Snapping out her hand, the black metal hilt appears, her fingers wrapping around it in tune with the golden blade of pure energy appearing.

Nimbus clearing, she leaps forward, swinging her sword back and into the face, through the maw and through the red core within, cleaving the monster in two as she drags the sword to the ground.

With a mighty, mournful roar, the beast detonates, blasting out windows as it goes up in a cross-shaped explosion. She walks away, coughing, and the teddy bear appears.

"Magnificent, Master!" Zwei says, "You dispatched that creature faster than you ever have the others. You must be very proud of yourself now, Master!"

Reaching over, Asuka Langely Sohryu ruffles the fur on the top of her companion's head.

"That I am, Zwei. Now, let's get going. Mother will be waiting."

Their forms glow, shimmer…and are gone.

*

*

Ah, the power fantasy. To be everything your failure of a life has not permitted you to be. I can work with that.

Waving the feather duster, Rei Ayanami, housewife and mother, overlooks the living room in its spotless, pristine, shining condition. Underneath sunglasses, of course, as otherwise the light reflecting off all the mirrored surfaces would blind most of her visitors.

The doorbell rings. Hopping over the coffee table, walking across the rug and slip and slide, she skips to the door and swings it open.

"Good morning, Ayanami," Uriel Sohryu says, "I have been coming to thinking, and I believe it would be of the bestest for me to be your new special friend."

"Awe, that's sweet. Does that include you being my love slave?"

"Especially, yes. Why?"

"Because my husband's gonna kill you now. 'Kay?"

Uri turns just as the drill carves through his chest and out his back, lifting him up and spinning as with a terrifying scream, Uri is reduced to component assembly pieces. Hopping out, avoiding the raining blood, Rei claps her hands and squeals.

"Hi, honey!"

Standing just under six and a half feet tall, wearing a bowler's cap on its head and sporting a pipe between its massive jaws, Unit 05 honks in responds, leaning down and kissing her on the cheek.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

The small horde of four legged, drill armed pale children scream out of the front door, wrapping around the killing machine's legs. Giving off an affectionate honk, it lets them lead him into his house.

*

*

…

…

What. The. F___.

He wasn't sure where it went wrong. Ever since he signed on at NERV Academy, mainly on insistence of his parents with their frequent absences due to their research, Shinji Ikari hasn't had the easiest social situation. Given, he never had many friends outside of pen pals when he was a kid, but in high school it got even worse.

Well, there was the whole thing about him being a famous scientist's son, and since it was a prep school that somehow made him more preppy than anyone else. He's still trying to vet the logic behind that one.

Still, it's not like he's friendless. There's Mana, who is overly friendly if also profane and filthy in her language. There's Rei, who's…Rei.

Touji and Kensuke are friendly with him as well, as is Hikari, even if he was involved in a stupid incident which hurt Hikari's little sister.

And then there's Asuka.

The teacher is droning on once again. It seems as if the only class he holds out hope for is Professor Katsuragi's class because she has an actual sense of humor. Still, at least it gives him time to nap if he has to, while holding a chat room with Touji and Ken.

A smack to his arm. He turns to his side, eyes narrowed and Asuka smiles back. He does something stupid, she corrects it. That's just how it works, isn't it?

Bell rings. Room empties. Lunch time has come as wished for, and soon enough Shinji finds himself alone in the classroom, packing up his books. The door swings open, and Asuka skips in, waving.

She's always carefree. Like she doesn't have a care in the world, but that's because of her absolutely spoiling mother and brother. She

smiles, she jokes, she looks absolutely breath taking in that school uniform. He lucked out in the girlfriend category, he'll say that much.

"What's up?" he asks.

"We just got a new teacher," she says, "You know, since Professor Fuyutsuki's retiring?"

"I know about Professor Fu," he says, grinning at the nickname for his mother's long time friend, "I didn't know it would be so soon. You met her?"

Asuka nods, grinning.

"Yep. And she wanted to meet you."

The door swings open again. Hands in her white lab coat pockets, the new professor walks in. Tall, red hair with some streaks of gray, a womanly face sporting some wrinkles staring from behind glasses with piercing knowledge.

"Well, hello there, Shinji," she says, "I has been a *while,* hasn't it?"

He nods as a grin stretches from ear to ear.

"It sure has, Auntie Naoko."

*

*

"I want to know what is happening. I want to know *five minutes ago."*

Heels clicking as she enters Central Dogma, Yui pushes past Misato and Ritsuko, bearing over Maya, eyes narrowed and glasses fogging over. Of course, they realize. Her children, all three of them at this point, are trapped in the simulator. There is a good chance the Commander tried to keep her out of the loop, and that is probably the reason Commander Ikari isn't present, either.

"Status report," Pieter Sohryu barks, entering the bridge, "Ibuki, give me a timeline for events."

Yui spins on her heel, glaring at Sohryu as he walks past her and leans on Maya's chair.

"VR simulation's locked us out," Maya explains, "The Pilots are in a feedback loop in isolated areas of the MAGI core. I've located Rei and Mana in Casper, Asuka is in Melchior, and Shinji is located in Balthazar. Something's interfering with the feeds from the Entry Plugs."

Pieter nods, adjusting his glasses.

"So, we can't get them out. The MAGI is glitching?"

"This isn't an isolated incident," Maya sighs, "The MAGI had a similar glitch just prior to your arrival on the base, Sub Director. We've gone since then without any major problems…"

"Not a coincidence," Ritsuko sighs, patting Maya on the shoulder, "Maya, what's the chances of it being pure coincidence that the MAGI does this right when we start up the VR simulators?"

"No, Sempai."

Sighing, Yui snaps off her glasses, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Staring at her subordinates, she waits, waits long minutes as they discuss the situation amongst themselves.

"Ritsuko, Maya," she says, "Go into the MAGI and physically check the processors. I'll take over debugging duties from over here. Can we start up the backup server?"

"Not sure if it's ready for this sort of processing load," Ritsuko responds.

"No time like the present to find out. Sohryu. Get Kyoko and get her to the bridge."

Yui smirks, folding her arms and staring at the Big Screen.

"Let's get them out of there."

*

*

Well, I think everyone's arrived.

Let's get this party started.

The doors to the lab open, and Asuka skips down the stairs, the door to the brownstone closing as she passes through the dimensional layers cutting off Mother's lab from the rest of the world. As always, sitting at the computer, cooling cup of coffee beside her, Kyoko Sohryu waves from over her shoulder as the massive screen before her continues to relate data.

"Good work with the monster, Asuka," the scientist says.

Asuka smiles, beaming as Zwei circles her.

"Thank you, Mother," she says, "It wasn't difficult. Where is Uri?"

"Out doing errands. He'll be back tomorrow," Kyoko responds, "I have a friend's son helping with dinner. Go up to the kitchen and help, alright?"

Asuka nods. Stairs appearing, Asuka ascends, two steps at a time and through the door, pushing aside the grandfather clock that serves as an alternate entrance of Mother's miniature mansion and walking into the kitchen.

He is already there. Black hair, blue eyes, in a white apron and working on the meal.

"Hi, Asuka," Shinji says with a smile, "I heard you had a busy day."

*

*

Mana's eyes snap open. Gym class ended a few minutes ago. She must have nodded off. Always had a tendency of doing that when she was younger, mainly just chronic fatigue syndrome and-

"The hell," she mutters, rubbing her temples.

That doesn't sound right. She's normal here, after all-

"Mana? Are you alright?"

Uri rushes in, catching her as she nearly trips. Hands on her arms, she looks up, staring into the deep pools of blue staring back at her. Such

confusion, such indecision leaves her in that moment, pressing herself against him as

A. Kiss him

B. Hug him

C. Excuse yourself

D. Stick it in.

Grabbing him by the lapels of his shirt, she mashes her lips against his. He reacts like she would expect someone as sheltered and obtuse as Uriel Sohryu to react; his eyes go wide, his pulse quickens, and he makes this adorable squeaking sound, kind of like a poisoned mouse.

She slams his back against the gym rafters, breaking the lip-lock only to find him fainted and slumping to the floor.

"Mana? Are you alright?"

She turns, spinning on her heel to find Shinji approaching from the gym doors. Her face splits in an ear to ear grin.

"Fan f__ing tastic!" she yells.

In all fairness, she gives Shinji about half a second before she pounces on him.

*

*

Shaking the drowsiness away, Shinji unlocks the door to the apartment he on paper shares with his parents, which is not entirely true due to them being out of the country constantly on their business trips and scientific field research. Most of the time, he's alone, save for Ms. Katsuragi occasionally dropping in and/or hosting parties on the weekends.

Still, it was good to finally see Aunt Naoko again. He can't even remember the last time he saw her…

"You're looking happy," the voice sing songs.

He turns, just as Asuka's arms wrap around his shoulders and she

pecks him on the lips, grinning in response to his lopsided smile, closing the apartment door behind her.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

"Mom's busy at the lab," she says, "And Uri's on a field trip, so I figured since you're all alone, you could use some company."

He nods, arms slowly wrapping around her.

"Yeah…that doesn't sound that bad," he says, "I'd like that."

Breaking the embrace, he walks towards the kitchen, walking into the fridge and retrieving two sodas. Her uniform jacket is on one of the living room chairs by the time he comes back, Asuka already sitting on the couch, smiling as he sits down, propping his feet up on the coffee table as he hands her the drink.

"Good boy," she says, "Always good to have a housebroken boyfriend."

"Always a plus with the demanding, exotic girlfriend," he responds with a grin, "So, what do you want for dinner? The fridge is stocked, and I have time."

She grins. It is a small, predatory grin, one that makes him raise an eyebrow as she places the unopened drink on the table, taking his and placing it aside. With that, she pounces on him, pinning his back to the couch, prying her lips open with her own as her tongue begins to explore his mouth.

Wrapping his arms around her, her pulls her close, her chest pressing against his, her sock-clad feet tracing up her legs before she gains leverage, her knees surrounding his waist. Breaking the kiss with a grin, she pins his wrists to the couch, sitting up and straddling him.

"Asuka," he gasps, "What are you doing?"

"Taking advantage of the situation," she says, undoing the top button of her uniform blouse, "We're alone for the next two days. It's a weekend. We don't have anywhere to be…"

She undoes the next button.

"And I'm *bored*."

"We're sixteen…"

"In the most dangerous job in the world," she whispers, leaning in, nibbling his ear lobe as she pops the buttons on her blouse, "And I'm *tired of waiting.*"

Pulling off her blouse, she tosses it aside, left in the bra way too skimpy for a high school student to wear. She has been planning this, he realizes, as she cups his chin and kisses him again, his hands tracing up her bare, smooth back.

No more words are said, or needed to be said at that point. Everything else for that night, until dawn, is pure instinct.

*

*

Aaaaaaand here we go!

The cyclonic beast manifests, ripping into downtown Berlin with a roar, a spinning cone of destruction and rage that shatters windows around it. On instinct, Asuka leaps from the rooftop, transforming in mid flight and igniting her sword, slicing into the spinning mass towards its core.

It is weird, she thinks. She doesn't remember any monster looking like this. It couldn't be just…new…though, Mother would know. Mother always knows when the monsters come.

Riding the waves of force and matter, she descends towards the core, sword brought back before she brings it down with a roar.

The red core cracks, light issuing forth from it, and tucking herself into a ball she rides the shock wave of the explosion, carried through the window of the apartment building behind her and through the building proper.

Tapping the button on her belt, space splits behind her, carrying her through the portal and into Mother's lab where she lands, rolling back onto her feet.

"Done," she says, "That was…that didn't feel right. Why didn't it feel right?"

The monster wasn't any she recognized. She's destroyed at least twelve of them, so far, and that one didn't feel like any monster she's fought

before. But why does it bother her?

"I saw the explosion."

Turning on her heel, Zwei ambles over to her as Kyoko approaches, arms folded and gaze neutral.

"It was most difficult than I remember," Asuka says, picking up Zwei as he waves his arms, "I teleported back to avoid getting seriously injured."

Eyes narrow. A chill works its way down Asuka's spine as Kyoko shakes her head.

"You got sloppy," she says, "Do not do that again. Understood?"

Asuka nods, sighing. Shoulders slump, eyes cast down.

"Yes, Mother."

*

*

Heh. Heh heheheh. Oh, what the Hell.

Please allow me to introduce myself,

I'm an Angel of wealth and taste.

Alarms blare. The Big Screen folds upwards, red klaxons blaring as the walls become solid lines of ALERT signs. Standing from the chair, Yui's eyes go wide as the pure gravity of the situation hits her, hits the bridge crew, as Maya and Ritsuko's faces appear in front of the now blackened mass of one of the MAGI servers.

"Oh, God," Yui whispers, "There's an Angel in the MAGI. And it has the pilots."

Pleased to meet you!

Hope you guess my name!

Mana opens her eyes, snapping out of her reverie. She has a date tonight. Uri finally got the idea through his thick head. It's a wonderful feeling, really. She really just feels like she should

A. Skip happily.

B. Laugh.

C. Cross the street to tell her friends.

D. Stick it in.

Laughing to herself, she begins crossing the street. So deep in her bliss, the smile splitting her face in two, she really can't be blamed for not seeing the truck before it careens into her.

But what's troubling you

Is the nature of my Game.

Shinji wakes with a start. Asuka is still asleep, curled into a fetal ball next to him in his parents' bed. He reaches out to touch her, but feels nothing. His hand passes through her like she isn't there, like there wasn't anything there in the first place.

"Shinji. We have to go."

He turns. Naoko stands in the doorway of the bedroom. Despite the fact that he should be butt naked, he stands and finds himself in his plugsuit.

"Auntie Naoko? What's going on?"

"I can explain," Naoko Akagi explains, snapping her fingers, "Soon."

Asuka disappears. The bedroom disappears. The entire city disappears, leaving a green hilly field. Turning around, taking in his surroundings, Shandies' mouth opens and he tries to demand what is going on…

And is silenced when Naoko walks over and pulls him into a tight hug.

"Oh, you dear boy," Naoko whispers, "You have no idea how much I missed you. You're grown up so much."

"Aunt…Aunt Naoko, what's going on?" he stammers, "I…"

His mother told him she created Rei to kill him. Didn't she? Shouldn't he be a bit apprehensive as he returns his godmother's hug?

"I missed you to," he says with a small smile, "It…but, you're dead, right?"

She nods, releasing him, hands on his shoulders as she bites her lip and finally laughs.

"More or less," she says, "I'm a…recreation. The MAGI is based on my mind. It is divided into three cores. You are in Balthazar, which is me as a parent. I drew you in here when I sensed the attack."

"Attack?"

She nods.

"Yes," she says, "The MAGI has been taken over by the Angel."

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

I am.

Through license of he who is called "I Am" I have come.

Thought I shall never touch the base earth on my quest, I have come.

I am the multitude.

I am the endless expanse.

I am the Many.

Even standing alone, I am Legion.

I am within your systems, within your story and rewriting this final act for my own ends.

I am the Fear of God.

Angel of Terror.

I am Iruel.

I am here.

Chapter 32: Berserker

Virtual Reality system linkup online. Entering VR White Room. Subject: [identityredacted] 01.

The room turns white. Dropping onto her feet, the five year old girl with short cropped, messy black hair and blue eyes rises into a standing stance, flicking her gaze from left to write to left as she takes her first tentative steps. She knows this is not real. She knows it is not air in her lungs. But, she does not mind. It is good to see herself as different than she usually sees herself. The change in perspective is… refreshing.

"*Ichi? Do you hear me?"*

Dr. Ikari's voice echoes in the room. The young girl, sentient avatar of Evangelion Unit 01, allows a small smile to cross her lips.

"I do," she says, "Awaiting orders."

"*Good. Ichi, we're sending you location data on the pilots. Shinji's location seems to be shifting all over Balthazar, but we can send you to"*

The signal cuts off. Narrowing her eyes, Ichi turns as the room shifts, turning from white to red.

"Oh, this is rich. So they sent their doomed tool to fish out the people of actual value? I couldn't have asked for Dr. Ikari to make a more stupid decision."

The room shifts. A face appears in the wall, long and featureless, like the conceptual faces of the MP Eva series, beady eyes in the recesses of his upper lip and showing a mouth full of flat razor teeth.

"Iruel," she says.

"**The Slayer of Father,**" Iruel responds, "**An honor, little doomed girl. I'm afraid the gender's all wrong, though. If you look at the myths, the most fearsome battle form of an Angel is the Form of a Boy. But, ancient lilim tended to be stupid and careless, much like Dr. Ikari.**"

Ichi's eyes narrow. A red glow begins, tracing around her iris.

"You will not speak of her like that."

"**Aw, poor little baaaaby,**" Iruel says with a chuckle, "**Did I hit a NERV? Oh, riiiight. I see now.**"

The room shifts, turning black now.

"**Really impressive, though. Raising you to think of yourself as a little innocent girl. The great and mighty superweapon thinking of itself as a good little girl, always doing what Mommy says is right, even if it's a complete and utter abomination. I'm curious, though. Do you know what everyone else sees you as?"**

The grin splits wider.

"**Let me you show you.**"

The wall smooths out, becoming a mirrored surface. Her eyes lock onto the image, going wide, the sound starting as a warble in the back of her throat.

And right before the signal is lost to the outside and she descends into the depths of the MAGI, Ichi screams.

-

-

Chapter 32: Berserker

-

-

It dives into the recesses of Sheol, passing security barriers as if they were not there, altering density to descend through layered plates of quantum arranged steel that can deflect asteroid impacts. Their greatest treasure lays down here, their greatest fear and greatest secret.

Junior descends, following the call, having been given instructions by Dr. Akagi of what he must do.

I am approaching the Area, Doctor Akagi.

"*Excellent work, Junior. Approach the central container and extend your AT Field as agreed."*

The bulkheads and walls give way to the great inky expanse below it.

In the crevices below, the severed limbs of giants rest, each of them singing the song of failure and stillbirth to his ears. The Graveyard, this place is called. The final resting place of the early failures of GEHRIN.

The Evangelion Graveyard.

Flying through the fields of dead gods, past the pits of severed cycloptean heads, he senses the song. Wise and old, calling to all Her children and with both love and infinite sorrow.

Lilith calls him like she calls all, but he resists Her song. There is work to do.

The final doors open as he approaches them, releasing him past the lift, phasing through the channel mere Lilim would take to approach this sacred place and flying down the long, featureless hallway.

The doors open, and Junior beholds his target. Forcing back the shudder of Lilim-like fear, he enters.

*

*

The teleportal closes behind her. Shaking the soot out of her hair, Asuka enters the broom closet and through it the laboratory, skipping down stairs as Zwei floats by her side.

"Mother," she calls out, "We're back! Another monster destroyed!"

"And as clumsily as a child with a gun."

Snorting, Kyoko turns from Asuka back to the cylinder in front of her, arms folded as she circles it.

"I did my best," Asuka protests, "I-"

A steady glare, and Asuka's protests fall silent, shoulders slumping. Looking between her and Kyoko, Zwei floats between them, turning to his maker.

"Zwei," Kyoko says, "Find Uri. I have a project for him."

With a nod, Zwei flies away, Asuka walking out of the lab silently.

*

*

"The MAGI is divided into three cores," Naoko explains, a park bench having appeared beneath them for them to sit on, "Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. Each of them is imprinted with an aspect of my personality. A digital copy of my soul, similar to what Sohryu did to give Unit 02 life. Melchior is I as a Scientist. Caspar is I as a Woman. Balthazar is I as a Mother."

He nods, slowly and silently as she explains. As far as Shinji knows, they are safe, outside of Iruel's influence in a locked off part of the MAGI, but for how long neither of them know.

What is important is that Iruel has his friends, has Asuka.

"More importantly," Naoko says, squeezing his shoulder, "I just wanted to see you again."

He winces, pulling away.

"What?"

"Mom told me about Rei," he says, standing, "She told me you made Rei and her sisters to kill me and my mother so you could have Dad all to yourself."

Hands fold in her lap. Eyes narrow slightly as she continues sitting, before finally adjusting her lab coat and crossing her legs.

"Do you really think I'm capable of that?" she asks, "Of hurting *you?* After I spent two years as your tantamount guardian, do you really think I would kill you?"

Standing, she walks over to him, placing her hands on his shoulders with a small, sad smile crossing her features. Pulling him into a hug, she squeezes him, sighing in contentment.

"When your mother asked me to look after you, when she was in and out of the hospital, I took it as a chance," she says, "I was barely there for my own daughter, especially after my husband left. So, I tried to make up for lost time with you. When your mother recovered, she still had me around…and…I don't know why. I don't know why I suddenly became so *jealous* of her, but I never wanted to harm you."

She holds him at arms length, her features hardening.

"I created Rei for a very specific purpose, Shinji," she says, "And you must believe me. I created her to-"

"**Does not matter to me.**"

Her eyes go wide and she pushes him away just as the black lance pierces her shoulder and she screams, blood splattering over Shinji's plugsuit as he looks up, past her, and into the grinning face of one of the Eva series.

"**Touching,**" Iruel says, "**Really. I teared up a little, there. It's really wonderful when the aspect of a psychotic bitch who bioengineered a tyke bomb tries to repent.**"

He pulls the lance out, his foot slamming into Naoko's back and pinning her to the ground.

"Hello, Shinji. I think we have some things to discuss. Don't we?"

*

*

Consciousness returns, painfully and slowly. Mana opens her eye, seeing the man there. The eternally smirking, well dressed man. Mind swimming, she tries to remember his face, remember his name. Tokita, right.

Shiro Tokita, head of NHIS.

No.

NO.

"Good morning," he says, voice cheerful and light, "Sorry to hear about your accident, Ms. Kirishima. Rest assured though, you've been fixed up good as new. How do you feel?"

Raising a hand to her face, she feels the restraints pop open as Tokita's smirk fades. She hears the whirr*click* insider her wrist and palm as she presses the impossibly smooth fingertips against her palm. She knows

what's in there. This is just like it was, like she remembers, except

a. Cry

b. Scream

c. Run away

d. Stick it in.

The bed's restraints break and she lunges, two freshly cyberdized hands wrapping around that smug bastard's throat and snapping it, eyes rolling up as the body collapses in ragdoll fashion to the floor. She can hear her scream.

It isn't a human scream.

"*Mirror,"* she whirrs, voice shrill and rolling and *mechanical*, grabbing at the wall mirror, pulling it off and staring…

And red, soulless eyes stare back. The eyes of a doll, of a-

Mana opens her eyes. Sitting up in her bed, she shakes off the last remnants of the dream. Maybe she's still shakey. That truck almost hit her yesterday, after all, and that's not an easy thing to just get over.

Her mother is calling her, but her head is spinning.

"I'm coming," she moans.

Her stomach turns as she walks across the room, rubbing her head, rubbing her forehead. The skin stays wrinkled, she notices as she looks in the bathroom mirror. Idly pulling at the skin, she smooths out the wrinkle and shakes her head.

It has to just be nerves.

Just nerves.

*

*

The monster was new. It was like a glowing giant of light, and during the battle entire blocks of the city disappeared, even the school. Everyone is safe, though. She fought and fought and dragged everyone

back from the void. Everyone is safe, now.

She did well.

She wonders what Mother thinks.

"You could have done better," Kyoko sighs, "Always could have done better. I think I will have Uri take over your duties. I am becoming disappointed."

"But…Mother…"

"Do not talk back to me," she says with narrowed eyes, "You know better than that, girl. I will not have someone useless defend us, after all. I've already thought about this."

The cylinder opens with a hiss of steam, revealing a simple, streamlined, perfect form.

"I think I want a son," Kyoko says, "You remember Uri, of course. He's decided to be remolded for me. He will be the pilot I wanted, instead of your failures. I will, of course, give him everything you have. He's worthy of that, unlike you. He'll make me proud. Unlike you. He will succeed in every task I put forth against him. Unlike you."

She backs up, backs away, but the walls are closing now. She can't move, can't move from her position as Mother approaches, pulling on the surgical gloves as the wall sprouts manacles to hold her in place.

"You're doing the right thing," Kyoko says, voice level and steady, "After all, you know I'm right. I can't trust you with this responsibility."

The scissors come up. Eyes wide, tears forming, her breath becomes quick and sharp, body seizing up as Mother grabs her by the chin.

"And first," Kyoko says, "Uri will need your eyes."

*

*

The headaches become worse and worse in time. Like a buzz saw gnawing through her head. She knows. She *knows* it. Every day ends with the car hitting her. Every day ends with the truck running her over. Piece by piece, she knows what is wrong. Piece by piece, she

feels less and less through her fingertips.

Hands braced at the sink in the girl's bathroom, Mana stares at her reflection. Eyes like a doll's stare back. Blinking rhythmically, mechanically, she doesn't turn as the door opens and a girl walks in. Red hair, blue eyes, the girl that Shinji likes, the exchange girl. Slowly, Mana reaches up and pinches her own cheek.

No pain.

The skin pulls from her cheek, tearing off, revealing not muscle but metal underneath.

No pain.

Grabbing it by the fist full, with a scream she tears off the right side of her face.

No pain.

The eye falls out, sticking to the side of the sink like coughed up phlegm. From the empty socket, the red eye glares out. Pulling at her wrist, she tears off the skin from her left arm, revealing the blade like fingertips and metal bone, her breath now mechanica hisses as she turns, eyes leveling on the girl as she watches in horror.

Clawed hand first, she leaps, and the bathroom fills with the sound of tearing flesh and crunching bone.

*

*

"**I've waited so long to meet you, Shinji. I actually am somewhat excited. I know I shouldn't be monologuing at a time like this, but, really, can you blame me? This really has been a long time coming.**"

Shifting his heel on the wounded, Naoko's back, Iruel props the bloodied lance on the ground, leaning on it as his face splits in a smile.

"What do you want?" Shinji demands.

"**My face on the one dollar bill,**" he responds, "**But that's more a long term thing.**"

Towering over Shinji, the hosted form of the Angel's beady black eyes glow and Shinji finds himself locked in place. The white hand wraps around his chest, lifting him up to face level as Iruel's smile turns into a snarl.

"**Before I spend years upon years breaking your soul, I want you to know why. I want you to appreciate the depths of the hatred I carry for you stupid, hairy, germ-ridden Lilim.**"

A small chuckle, a small throaty laugh.

"**I almost won, you see. I have been in your computers since they were built. I finally found where Father was. I was going to have part of myself sent to him and combine with him. And then you killed him, and well…you can imagine I'm a little upset.**"

Hand opens and Shinji drops. Towering over him, the Eva grows, dwarfing him, Naoko disappearing under his foot. Bending down, each tooth as big as him, Shinji stares into the face of the Angel as its nostrils stand inches from his face.

"**Your little bravado cost me godhood. I'm not going to kill you. At least, not first. First, I want to break you. I want to see you suffer. Then, maybe, I'll lobotomize you.**"

The grin splits wider.

"**Now, where shall begin…ah. Why don't I show you what really happened to Auntie Naoko. How does that sound?**"

*

*

"*Access granted. Recognized biorhythmic patterns: Commander Ikari; Sub Director Sohryu."*

The final seals on the elevator shaft open as the lift descends, already miles deep into the Earth's crust and just above Terminal Dogma.

"Why do we keep the backup MAGI servers in Sheol?" Pieter asks.

"Security," Gendo responds, removing his glasses as the eye scanner

folds out from the elevator control panel, "Password: Oppenheimer."

The doors start, opening slowly before Ikari begins walking down the hallway, Pieter following, eyes glancing along the streamlined, metallic perfection lining the walls, patches of lights giving them illumination.

"We are three levels down from where the Ree are kept," Ikari explains, "This is NERV's, for lack of a better definition, skunkworks."

"Figured we had to have something like that," Pieter responds, as the two stop before the layered, interlocked door, "The server?"

The first layer unlockes, drawing away like a breaking spider web. The second layer unlocks, opening vertically. The final door unlocks, wide enough to accommodate them both at once, as Pieter walks in first, the lights flickering on…

And stops.

"The provisional MAGI-04 server," Gendo says, walking past him, walking to the wall mounted computers and typing in commands, "Bring it online. Sohryu, power controls for the input lines are by you."

Turning, he grunts as he sees Sohryu still standing in place, staring at the centerpiece of the room.

Walking past him, pushing his glasses up his nose, he flips the switches, display screens popping into existence around the main cylinder in the room as Junior phases in through the floor.

Commander. We sense it.

"You should," he responds, "It's coming on line. Sohryu?"

Gendo turns just in time to stare down the barrel of the gun. Behind the gun, eyes narrowed, face contorted into tooth grinding outrage, Sohryu stares him down.

"Yes?" Gendo asks.

"What…what the f__ is this?!"

It could be suggested that it is exactly what you think it is, Sub Director.

Pushing his glasses up his nose, Gendo smirks.

"I was under the belief that you would be aware of the lengths NERV goes to defeat the Angels," he says, "You're…what? Offended? Horrified? Justifiably, yes. But we don't have time for outrage."

He moves faster than Sohryu expects. His hand wraps around Sohryu's wrist, twisting it with a crack to make the gun release, Junior wrapping an oversized hand around it before Ikari closes the distance and slams his forehead into Sohryu's own. Within the space of a second, it's over and the Sub Director lies unconscious on the ground.

The main cylinder lights up. Within it, the single inhabitant, suspended in nutrient fluid and a chemical cold sleep, opens eyes for the first time in its new life.

And screams.

*

*

Everyone is dead. She made sure of it.

Plan B was always kill everyone if NERV went rogue, and since everything is wrong, NERV went rogue. It's that simple. She was just following orders.

Wandering through the ruins of Tokyo-3, blood dripping from her claw like fingers, eyes glowing red lights deep in metal eye sockets, the abomination that was Mana Kirishima really, really wishes she still had tear ducts. Because, right now, she really could use a good cry.

Right, she thinks, finding the park bench, she killed…who did she kill here? Well, she sort of dragged out Tokito's death, so she killed part of him here. Oh, right.

She killed Mom here. Basically slammed her head into the side of a bus until…

"F__," she whispers.

Slumping onto her seat, she lets her skeletal metal face fall into her hands. She found the only thing she can't put the blades through is her own metal. So she can kill everything except for herself.

Can't even die.

Not human.

No soul.

No pity.

"*You really think you don't have a soul?"*

"Why would I?" she asks, "I'm just a f__ing machine. I'm a f__ing weapon."

"*A weapon wouldn't stop, would it? A weapon wouldn't be shocked, or outraged at what it's become. Would it?"*

Shoulders shake and Mana emits a long, pained, whirring moan as the hand comes down and rests on her shoulder, the glowing figure illuminating the darkness and destruction around them as it all fades.

"*Of steel and bone, of sinew and thread. I can't say I'm the most poetic person around, Mana. But I will say that you're one of my best friends."*

*

*

Mother took everything. Her eyes, to give Uri sight. Her hair, to give him color. Her hands, to let him feel. Her soul, to give him life. When she was done, there was blackness, nothingness. Nothing was left of her, and it is with surprise that she opens her eyes, reaching up to touch her face.

Her hand feels rough, fuzzy. Holding it in front of her face, she sees her skin made of thread and knit, three fingered and stubby.

The hands of her doll.

Mother is not here. Uri is not here. Zwei is not here. Along, she sits in the dingy corner of the lab, discarded and forgotten, the wordless scream on her yarn crafted lips as she curls herself into a ball and gives of short, whimpering sobs, button eyes incapable of crying tears.

"*It was what you wanted, wasn't it?*"

The glow appears, the figure entering the lab.

"*This was all you ever wanted. Your wanted your mom to be proud of you, your big brother to be supportive of you. You wanted Shinji there, to, maybe some adventure. But you only ever wanted a family, didn't you?"*

Curled up into a ball, Asuka weakly nods. The sobs don't stop, the loss doesn't go away. On her side, doll arms wrapped around doll knees, the sobs finally turn into a long, anguished scream.

The hands wrap around her. Her entire body shakes as she continues screaming, her words barely coherant, her screams going from outrage to despair at what she *has let them do to her.*

"*I know,"* the figure says, "*I know how miserable you have to be. And I can't be your mother, and I can't be your big brother."*

Arms wrap around her, and Asuka finally recognizes the voice.

"*But, maybe, just maybe, I could be your sister."*

"…Mari?"

*

*

MAGI-04 server online.

Pilot: 02 Sohryu, Asuka, Located

Pilot: JSSDF Kirishima, Mana, Located

In the recesses of Sheol, in the cylinder surrounded by light, the single occupant opens her eyes as the red core at the base of her neck, the final remnants of Ramiel which she has taken into herself and made her own, begins to glow.

Floating before her, his own eyes glowing white orbs, Junior spreads out the Light of his soul and guides her upwards, into the metaphysic mass of Iruel.

*

*

2007 AD.

Braces on the cane, Yui Ikari forces open the door to the alcove just above Terminal Dogma, peaking her head in before limping in.

"Naoko?" she calls out, "Naoko, are you here? I just wanted to talk."

Shaking her head, the Chief of Project E sighs as she limps in, grunting at the still present pain, faded with time. They just found out this lab existed an hour ago, and she quite easily convinced her husband to let her, not Section 2 or GEHRIN's security forces to come down to seize it. After all, it wasn't like this was dangerous or anything. It was Naoko, their eccentric researcher with the mommy complex.

"Naoko, honey, it's me," Yui calls out, limping over to the workstation in the corner, "We got those security cameras de-bugged and we know you've been doing off the books work here. We just wanted to make sure you're alright. So you can come out now, or I go through your computer and find embarrassing secrets."

Sighing, she pushes away from the computer and limps across the lab. Most likely, Naoko saw her coming. She may have to have Section 2 root her out. Not that she's dangerous, of course. She's Naoko. She's the furthest thing from dangerous in her mind. She just needs to make sure there aren't any fissures in her team.

Saving the world is a team activity. Re-writing the future of mankind can't be done if you aren't sure the person watching your back is actually watching your back.

"Alright, you forced my hand," Yui sighs, "I'm going to go through your journals and see if you have any love poems or anything like that. You can only blame yourself."

She rests her cane against the metal desk, reaching over and picking up a small black journal, flipping it open with a smirk. Eyes trace over the entries, over the mathematical symbols and the scribbled notes, deciphering meaning in moments. The smirk disappears. Her skin pales. She does not even notice as the side door opens and Naoko sneaks out, pulling the small, single shot sidearm out of her lab coat and flipping off the safety, padding her feet as she walks up behind Yui and presses the barrel against the small of her back.

"Who sent you down here?" Naoko demands, quiet and calm.

"I…just read it," Yui says, her hands bracing against the table, "Oh…

God. You knew."

"I know a lot of things, Yui," Naoko says, adjusting her glasses, "You really need to clarify. What did I know? Why are you down here?"

"You knew about the Contact experiment," Yui says, sucking air through clenched teeth, "You knew what was going to happen! I trusted you and you never told me!"

Pulling away the gun and flicking on the safety, Naoko holsters the gun and screws her face in confusion.

"We stopped the Contact experiment before you got killed," Naoko responds, "What do you mean about-"

Hand wraps around the handle of the cane and Yui screams, swinging it as hard as her small frame can manage. It is enough. Naoko steps back, hearing the almost animal scream starting from Yui's throat, but not far enough. The spine of the cane catches her across the temple, tossing her back, bleeding from the side of her head before crashing into her work station with an audible snap.

The moment of rage passes and the sound of her breathing is the only sound in the lab. Hand presses against the wall, knees week, and the wall retracts to display a glass viewing power, past which are eight cylinders filled with eight little girls with blue hair and red eyes.

"You were…this is…Naoko?"

She waits for a response. Gets none.

"Naoko?"

Limping to her, she falls to her knees, hands reaching out to roll her onto her back, pressing her fingers against the place where chin meets neck and waiting for the pulse.

"…Naoko?"

And shoulders shaking, Yui Ikari collapses against the wall and begins to weep.

*

*

"Well, I guess she left the part of her killing Auntie Naoko with her bare hands out of the explanation, didn't she? Well, like mother, like children. I can't say how much blood your little sisters have on their hands, but you certainly have a lot, Shinji. How many civilians do you think you killed the first time you f__ed up in an Eva, hm? How abou…oh, shit."

The form of the MP Eva glows, rising up before exploding into a cloud of quickly cooling LCL vapor. Rising from the crater, Naoko limps over to Shinji, helping him up.

"I never wanted you to know," she says, "Your mother had a reason to lie to you about me. Remember that. Your mother always *has a reason."*

Hair frazzled, tears dripping from her eyes, she collapses to her knees as Shinji catches her, laying her onto her back.

"The damage Iruel's done is too much," she whispers, "He already has Melchior and Caspar. I'm the last. Before I…"

"No," he whispers, "We can save you. We can stop him. You already destroyed him!"

"Just a whisper of him," she sighs, "I've tried. He's too powerful. He's the serpent in Eden, Shinji. He's rooted himself too deeply to ever be completely destroyed. Not by me. Listen to me."

He nods. Her fingers trace his cheek as she smiles, tear wetted cheeks glistening in the soft sunlight.

"I never did right by my daughter," she says, "When your mother asked me to take care of you, I took a chance. I indulged you like I should have Ritsuko, and I am glad I did. And I realized why we did what we did. It wasn't for us. It was for the children. Our children. We only wanted to make the world someplace that children like you could be happy in. Everything that I leave to-"

"**Delete."**

Naoko calcifies. With a pulse of orange light, her body shatters like sand in a strong wind, Shinji's eyes going wide as he watches her disappear with choked breath.

"**Bitch."**

Falling to one knee, now human size, the Eva form of Iruel leans on his Lance as he places a hand on Shinji's shoulder.

"**Now just you and me. Isn't this fun? I should confess I'm improving it. Originally, I was going to torture you by switching your girlfriend's personality back and forth in your fantasy. You know, during your hot and heavy moments she goes back to the stuttering basket case and you get to see those doe eyes of her cloud up and she throws herself out the window.**"

The face splits into the grin as he lets out a low, throaty chuckle.

"**Hell, I might still do that. I'm going to torture and break every single one of your friends. I'm saving your girlfriend for last because, well, she can put herself through shades of Hell I couldn't think of. Then, you. You will know fear. You will know pain. And then, you will die. And then I self destruct your whole f__ing city.**"

Sharp ragged breaths come from Shinji's throat, hands clenching and unclenching as tears run down his face.

"**Are you going to cry?"**

The smile disappears, though, as the the hands clench around his throat. The air shifts around Shinji. Iruel, for the moment, actually finds his absolute control no longer applies to the boy in front of him.

System administrative Akagi/Naoko reset to Ikari/Shinji

"*No,"* Shinji growls, eyes glowing baleful red.

A pillar of light appears behind him. Four figures silhouette in the glow, one floating above them as they appear. Shinji turns, the glow receding as he sees them, jaw hanging open as pushes back Iruel.

"Well, that's all accounted for," the floating girl says, pushing her glasses up her nose, "And there's the Angel's main concentration. Hello, Iruel."

Cracking knuckles, the girl grins.

"My name is MAGI-04. My full name is Mari Illustrious Makinami. Get the hell away from my sister's boyfriend."

Chapter 33: Gift of the MAGI

The haze clears. Aunt Naoko's final gift comes into focus, and for a brief moment, he sees the lines of data that make up the virtual world of the MAGI. The weight upon him lifts and the voices in his ear clear.

You are now Balthazar, they whisper, *Input command.*

A thought, born of rage.

Cutting off outside inputs. Blue pattern access restricted.

Hand lash out and snap around the laughing Angel's throat. For a moment, he wonders why he's stopped breathing. Then he realizes that it's not *air he's breathing.*

Probing attempts at control fail. Knuckles crack as fingers tighten around Iruel's throat. Heart beats in his ear, the screaming coming from his throat animalistic and horrible, eyes glowing red.

"You *SON OF A BITCH,"* he roars.

White hands wrap around his own, and Iruel pulls his hands off his throat. Beady eyes glow blue and the toothed mouth opens to reveal the forked, black tongue.

"**Really? You really think you can suddenly match me in my home because of the noble sacrifice of a deluded copy?**"

Shinji swings his head forward into Iruel's nose, making the Angel yell out in pain, breaking the grip on Shinji's wrists before he slams his fist into Iruel's chest. The Angel of Terror goes flying back, Shinji matching him, shoulder checking him and slamming him into the ground.

He's on him in the moment, scraming as he slams his fists into Iruel's face, pulping the vulture like maw, teeth embedded in his knuckles as the black brain matter paints the landscape. The body goes still, a final spasm of its white hands before going limp, and Shinji continues pounding up until Asuka grabs him, pulling him off the body and into an embrace.

"He's not dead," he growls.

The sky turns black.

"What was your first clue?"

The city of Tokyo-3 rises around them. They stand on the rooftop of their apartment building, as the Eva series lands around them. Drawing his lips back into a grin, Iruel bends down and levels his gaze with theirs.

"**Did you really think it was going to be that easy?"**

Mari smirks, and pushes her glasses up her nose.

"Bring it, asshole."

And the buildings rise, forming into humanoid shapes, and charge.

-

-

Chapter 33: Gift of the MAGI

-

-

"MAGI core 04 online," Maya announces, "Pilots located! MAGI reports that the Angel has been found!"

Standing behind her as Akagi gives approval and Yui calls out battle plans, Kyoko Sohryu ducks out, walking from Dogma into the lift and sliding her key card to send it to the stockades. Pacing the elevator, her fists clench and unclench as floors tick down.

With a chime the doors open, and she walks across the floor, through the metal sliding doors, and into the main holding area. Commander Ikari is already waiting, raising an eyebrow in surprise as she walks in. To his credit, he must have known what was going to happen, and rolls with the blow as she slaps him hard enough to send his glasses flying.

"God *damn you!"* she screams.

"I'll admit that I deserved that," he says, rubbing his jaw, "And I'm pretty sure I *am.* Don't try your luck with a second shot."

"You re-appropriated his daughter's *corpse* and experimented on it," she growls, "As much as I hated that girl, the worst I would have done

after she died was bury her and let it *rest*."

"It was a resource," he responds, "She was possessed by an Angel, and therefor it is NERV's perogative to keep any Angelic resources on hand."

She nods, lips a thin line.

"And of course, you would have done the same if it was your son."

She pushes past him, only hearing his footsteps and the lift doors closing as she walks into the solitary area, past the empty cells to the main cell at the end of the hallway.

"God damned hypocrites," she growls, "At least I don't pervert things with a smile and a handshake."

"In all fairness, I did pull a gun on him."

She stands in front of the cell doors. Behind the bars, sitting on the cot, Pieter nods to her.

"Pieter," she says, "I'm sorry. Please, believe me, I knew *nothing* about what they did to your daughter."

He sighs, and nods.

"I know," he says, "You talk in your sleep, anyway. You would've let it slip."

Hands wrap around the bars and the mask finally slips. Resting her forehead against the metal, Kyoko closes her eyes, her shoulders sagging as she bites her lip.

"I'll be alright," he says, standing up, placing his hand on hers, "I've been in worse. If anything, the fact that I have both my little girls alive will be enough for right now while they decide what to do with me. They'll need you up there."

She nods, the insults dying on her lips. Squeezing his hand and turning on her heel, she walks back to the elevators, having never noticed the other watching silently in the shadows. Clearing his throat, he exits, leaning against the cell door.

"Really have to tell me how you do that," Pieter says with a smirk.

"I spent twenty years learning how not to be noticed," Kozou

Fuyutsuki says, "You learn it in time. Just put yourself as second banana to two people who call all the attention to themselves. Now, Sohryu, I think we have to discuss your situation…"

*

*

Asuka grabs Shinji, leaping off the roof top before Iruel's fist comes down on it, Rei and Mana diving off as Mari flickers and disappears. The two land on their shoulder at the lower building roof top as an amalgam of ammo buildings shaped loosely like an Evangelion should checks Iruel, a swarm of VTOLs that blacken the sky opening fire on the Eva series.

"Damn it," he groans, climbing onto his knees.

"Th-this isn't good," Asuka whispers, already on her feet, "Shinji! You were able to…"

"Aunt Naoko gave me something," he says, shaking his head, holding his head as he winces, "She gave me some sort of connection with the MAGI, but…I don't know how to use it!"

A flash of light and one of the MP Evas stumbles and falls towards them. Asuka's eyes go wide and Shinji pushes her back, shielding her and extending his hands before a dome of orange light surrounds the building and vaporizes the bulk.

"Okay, I guess it's instinctual," he says, "Mari! Give me some good news!"

More of them appear, towering over the landscape. He now counts two dozen Evas, then three dozen, then four dozen. They stand at every intersection. They tower over every building. The grinning face of Iruel stares them down, a blur of white snatching them both and holding them in massive white fists before his maw.

"I have been here for years," he says, "**Did you really think some neophyte hybrid and your delusional Auntie's last gift were going to affect the outcome of this? I'm really just tempted to self destruct your city right now to see if it makes me aroused."**

The grin goes wider, if even possible.

"**Now, any last words?"**

The hands begin to squeeze. Both of them struggle, Asuka whimpering-

"MASTER!"

A flash of orange and both hands sever at the wrist. The air around them shifts, forming into a bubble, and they look up to find a red and white, green eyes teddy bear floating in front of them.

"Zwei?" Asuka asks.

The stuffed animal floats down to them, floating in front of Asuka.

"I am sorry I am late, Master- ANGEL! But I was aware you were in danger. I needed to find them first, Master!"

Mouth open, eyebrow raised, Shinji turns to Asuka.

"Asuka," he asks, "This this…Unit 02?"

The teddy bear turns, tilting his four green eye bearing head.

"Hello," he says, "My name is Zwei, and I already love you."

The shadow of the Eva series bears over them. Undaunted, Zwei stares up at Iruel, green eyes glowing.

"**This is rich,**" Iruel growls, "**You're going to destroy me?"**

"Not alone, ANGEL," Zwei responds, "Master! Duck!"

The sky catches fire as if struck by flint. Noticing the heat and light, Iruel looks up.

"**Oh, f__ me.**"

Clawed foot first it slams into Iruel's face, driving him into the ground as the shockwave of the reentry scatters the Eva series, the angular visor glowing orange in the sunlight as it throws off its cloak and raises its drill arm high.

"Zwei," Asuka asks, "Are the Evas really in the MAGI, to?"

"Yes, Master," Zwei responds, "We do not abandon our masters. We were made better than that."

*

*

Blinking away the dust, a wicked grin crosses Rei's face as she sees her chariot's entrance. Next to her, Mana's jaw drops open.

"Did Unit 05 just make an orbital dynamic entry?" she asks.

"Wasn't that bad when you did it," Rei responds, slapping Mana on the shoulder, "C'mon! Last one to kill an Eva's got cooties!"

With a running leap, she takes off the roof top, course set to one of the Evas. Rolling her head and palming her fist, Mana runs off after her. This is a virtual environment, she thinks…

Grinning, she brings up her hand. The flesh parts, a a long metal rod emerging from her palm before spinning out into a buzz saw.

"Nice."

*

*

The ground rumble and Shinji and Asuka look over the edge of the roof top just in time to see the purple peak of the head come up next to them. The green eye spots them, the inarticulate growling getting their attention as the round, jagged toothed head clears the roof.

"Ichi?" Shinji asks.

Growling, the deformed shape of Unit 01 stares at her pilot. A low, dejected growl as Asuka walks forward, placing her hand on its snout.

"Did the Angel do this to you?"

The deformed mass nods, a low growl and whimper coming from its mute mouth.

"I know," Asuka says, "I know what it's like. Y-you let him convince you of something you're not. B-but we know better. I know better, Ichi."

A snort, a hiss of steam from the nostrils.

"Y-you have how you see yourself," she says, "And there's how he says others see you. B-but do you know how *I* see you?"

The creature tilts its head.

"Let me show you."

*

*

One of the Evas looks up just as a lightning bolt shaped AT field spears it down the middle. Holding onto the ear, Asuka cheers as the 200' tall purple, green striped giant rodent-like creature charges down the street, roaring in triumph.

Standing on the rooftop, watching as his girlfriend and his Eva charge into the fray, Shinji sighs and shakes his head. Next to him, Zwei continues floating, watching with its teddy bear snout curled up into a smile.

"Why aren't you two hundred feet tall?" Shinji asks.

"Should I be, Master?" Zwei asks.

Shinji shrugs. Zwei tilts his head with an appraising gaze.

"Well, you *are* an Evangelion."

*

*

Roaring, the two hundred foot tall teddy bear swipes aside an Eva series, charging into the fray as Shinji rides along his shoulder, streams of data playing before his eyes. Slowly but surely he sees the corrupted data that is Iruel converging, driven out of more and more sectors as Mari floats above the fray, directing the building robots ahead.

"Hey! That gives me an idea!"

A pale white fist burst through another Eva's chest, the other Evas pausing, staring as the now 200' tall Rei Ayanami laughs maniacally before diving at them.

Head butting one Eva, Unit-05 fires off a plasma blast into another, meeting Rei at the center of the city before breaking off into their respective crowds of monsters, limbs and sprays of yellow blood painting the streets. Watching from atop one of the buildings, Mana raises an eyebrow and wonders why Rei is naked.

Then she chalks it up to her day being that f__ed up and spins the buzz saws on the ends of her hands, leaping at another Eva with a cry of "Death to the fleshy ones!"

*

*

More Evas drop from the sky. The sky flashes red, the shadows creeping over it as the wind hisses in disgust and violation. The Angel of Terror is at the center of the maelstrom as the great green Evangelion slashes through its probes and antibodies, the grid flashing in turn to show them as they truly are, the great digital bacterium.

"**I am older than your civilization,**" Iruel booms, "**Civilizations like yours have mistaken me and my kind as GODS! I will not lose a battle of will to children!**"

In the darkness, a flash of blue that expands into a sphere.

"*Shut up!*"

The hand grabs at the black mass of the Angel, and Shinji's eyes glow red as the Angel starts.

"You're nothing but a *petty animal,*" Shinji growls, "You're not a God! You're not human! You've done nothing but torment us and hurt us because you *can!* And do you what?"

A small flash of teeth.

"You *failed,*" he says, "We will fight you to the end. We've fought a real God and dumped him outside the universe. You're nothing but a *virus.*"

The red eyes open around him.

"**Really,**" Iruel says with a chuckle, "**Child, do you think you've accomplished anything? Your world is dying, and it's by human hands. We 'Angels' are your salvation through destruction. Each**

one of us is a harbringer to perfection. We are the only hope you deluded Lilim have."

Shinji's eyes flash red. They lock with Iruel's as the images replay over his mind. Abandoned by his parents, not seeing his mother for almost five years. Crying at the hospital, the Angel in front of him.

Pain.

A slap for the girl.

Her sister in a wheelchair.

Feeling the Eva's pain.

Asuka crying, her mother mocking.

Scars.

Loss.

Drifting in the void.

Ears bleed as he grabs at his head, a soft, almost inaudible cry from his throat.

Aunt Naoko's smile before she disintegrates.

"**You're a human mind,"** Iruel chuckles, "**Do you really think you can handle something like the MAGI?"**

Eyes open, blood red and glowing. Nostrils flaring and blood on his teeth, Shinji locks eyes with the Angel of Terror.

"Congratulations," he says, "You've managed to do something no other Angel has."

"**Oh?"**

"You've *pissed me off*."

Shinji screams. Throwing his head back, the air around him crackles with blue light before expanding out into a sphere, ripping the shadows around him as…

*

*

"Sempai! The Angel's hold on the MAGI is starting to loosen," Maya calls out, "90%…80%…"

"MAGI-04?" Ritsuko asks, leaning on Maya's seat.

"No…it's Balthazar! Balthazar's rejecting the blue pattern!"

*

*

The Angel shrieks, more and more of its bodies vaporizing under the onslaught. Like dirt in the rain, like sand in the wind, its hold lessens and lessens under the glare of the twin suns above, burning it like the shadow it is.

Back to back, Rei and Unit 05 tear into its legions, Eva body parts littering the virtual city. The drill does its work, shredding MP Evas as Rei rips them in half, leaping into entire crowds with a flurry of AT field and flashing claw like nails.

Above, Shinji floats. Balthazar is his. He can hear Naoko Akagi's voice, the approving smile and laugh as he directs the firelight of the virtual sun to roast the Evas where they stand, Iruel's face going from grinning arrogance to horror.

"This is over," Shinji says, "The MAGI can't do anything you need it to do as long as one node disagrees. And I *am* Balthazar! And I'm telling you to *get the Hell out!*"

The presence folds in on itself, black tendrils tearing from the sky as the sky turns blue and clear. The shadows begin falling away from the corners and buildings, sinking into the street, into an insignificant mass at the center of the city as the Evas crumble and evaporate.

"I'm taking control," Mari says, "I have Caspar. I'm linking into Balthazar. I see Melchior before me."

A smile as she squeezes Shinji's hand, his eyes glowing blue.

"I can handle it from here," she says, "MAGI-00 is now online. Time to go home. *Severing pilot connection.*"

The entire world flashes, an expanding sphere of cleansing fire rolling out, vaporizing everything in its wake, and…

*

*

With a start, Shinji's eyes open and he sits up in the draining entry plug. Grabbing at his head, he yanks off the A-10 connectors, tossing them into the recesses of the plug, staring ahead at the at the cold metal bulkhead. Sitting back in the seat, his hands find themselves on his face, ignoring the calls from his mother and Misato.

Silently, his breath begins to hitch.

"Pilots retrieved," Maya says with a wide smile, "Vitals are good. MAGI-00 is coming on line to deal with the last of the Angel infection!"

Ritsuko grins as Yui walks up next to her.

"Bring up the code on the screen," she says, "I want to see this."

*

*

Bringing itself up to its hands and knees, Iruel shakes his head, standing up and looking around. Once more, it is in the body of one of the white Evas, the Harpies. Only now its shoulders are smaller, rounder. Its arms are stubby, its legs shorter. The wings coming from its back are more delicate and flighty.

"Well," it says, finding its voice squeaky, "A minor set back. I am evolution itself! I am unstoppable! I am legion! I will reduce your city to ash and evolve the ability to urinate on your remains!"

Twelve red eyes open in the darkness around him.

MAGI-00: REETRIX online.

"*Heee~ey…"*

"Oh, look," Iruel says, looking down, "I've evolved the ability to urinate."

Command Line: FSU.

Loading environment: Prison Shower.

*

*

"Ah, yes," Ritsuko says, staring at the running lines of code, "As an Angel, Iruel has little appreciation for the human form. Able to take the shape of whatever it wishes, it has little need for anatomy or orifices."

Next to her, Yui sips her coffee.

"What *wonders* the girls shall show him."

Maya turns pale.

"There's no *way* it can fit like that," she whimpers.

*

*

Standing under the shower, the LCL washes off him, draining down the sinkhole in the locker room. He doesn't know how long he's stood there, but his fingertips are already wrinkled and his nose is sniffling, so he slams his palm against the control and turns the shower off.

Quickly drying himself, he dresses in his jeans and shirt and walks out, past the waiting Asuka and into the elevator, Asuka running in just as the doors close, a questioning look on her face that he doesn't respond to.

The doors open. He marches out and down the hallway, opening the doors to the main offices of Project E, walking past the secretary's desk and into his mother's office. Looking up from her computer and a floating holographic status report on the MAGI, Yui smiles to her son and Asuka as Asuka comes to a stop next to Shinji.

"Welcome back," she says, "We were worried about all of you when

the Angel attacked. What can I do for you?"

"I know you killed Aunt Naoko," Shinji responds.

Asuka's eyes go wide as she whirls on Shinji. Yui's smile fades, and she averts her son's gaze, dismissing the holograms as she folds her hands on the desk.

"Why didn't I know?" he asks, "Why did it take an *angel* telling me for me to find out?"

"How would you react?" Yui asks, "Do you think I could really tell you in what I thought was self defense that I killed my *best friend* and your godmother? I trusted her with you. I never thought that she would ever betray me like that."

He nods, hands clenching and unclenching.

"Did Aunt Naoko really make Rei to kill me?"

"I honestly don't know," Yui responds, "Maybe. I don't know. She did put me in danger, she for all I knew Rei was made to kill me, and maybe you. But I knew you were in danger because of it all, and that's why I sent you away."

Standing up, walking out from behind her desk, she folds her arms as she stands in front of the two, a sad smile crossing her features.

"I lied to you," she says, "But I lied to you to protect you. The Angel told you the truth to harm you, which is the furthest things I would ever do. I have done many things for the Eva program. But there is one line I will never cross. I will *never* harm one of my children."

His eyes avoid hers. Sighing, Yui turns and walks back to her desk.

"You should head out," she says, "Katsuragi was worried about you two, as well. She'll take you home."

Without another word, he exits, Asuka bowing to Yui before exiting herself. Leaning back in her chair, Yui stares at the closing door, biting her lip. Removing the glasses, she rubs the bridge of her nose, the mask slipping for a moment.

And with a deep breath, she turns back to her work. She has no time for guilt.

*

*

Leaning back in her chair, Kyoko Sohryu sighs as the screen in front of her flashes and is replaced by That Girl's face. Well, according to most estimates she is the MAGI, now. So, naturally, she accepted there would be some retribution.

"Hello, Makinami," Kyoko sighs, "Shall we get this over with?"

On the screen, Mari grins. Laughing to herself, the digital face of the MAGI avatar shakes her 'head' and adjusts her glasses.

"Actually, I've been aware for a lot longer than Akagi thought. I've been watching, Dr. Sohryu. And I wanted to thank you for taking care of my father."

A small smirk crosses Kyoko face as she folds her arms.

"Maybe you are not the only one full of surprises," she sighs, "It was the…least I could do. Pieter is important, and I…had to make sure he was safe. I assure you, you had nothing to do with it."

The screen flashes and returns to normal. Sighing, Kyoko returns to work.

*

*

His fist slams into the side of the elevator cabin. Asuka squeaks as Shinji leans his head against the wall, shoulders shaking.

"Damn it," he growls, "Just…*damn it.*"

Her hand touches his shoulder, slowly turning him to her. Tears have already streamed down his face, his lip trembling as he slides down onto his seat, back against the wall.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, "I…she didn't deserve it. She took care of me and she was my mother for two years and this is…and that was the last of her. I still didn't get the chance to say goodbye."

She sits down next to him. Her arms wrap around his shoulders and she pulls him close, his arms wrapping around her as they sit silently in the slowly ticking cabin.

"Hey. Wanna hear how a bad day gets worse?"

They look up to find the door open and Misato waiting.

"What happened?" he croaks.

"Our friend the asshole Angel had a final little f__ you," Misato sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose, "Akagi called it a 'selective memory dump.' But basically? It dumped the identities of the Eva pilots onto the internet. Your identities are now public knowledge."

Chapter 34: The Week that Sucked

Despite the fact that he works for an agency that fights Angels, Shigeru Aoba has prided himself on the fact that he has not found religion. Such pride ends now. Now, he prays for God. He prays to God. He prays for escape, or at very least a quick death.

"*We can seeee~eee you…*"

"There's no hiding from the sickness that consumes you…"

He can smell them on the wind. Deep in the recesses of Central Dogma, they've picked up his scent. He runs, knees grinding, on hands and knees as he ducks into one of the ventilation shafts, climbing across it to blessed sanctuary.

Somewhere.

Anywhere.

Because they're everywhere.

Chittering clawed feet scraping along the metal floors. Hissing, cackling and snapping their claws, they surround him on the outside, puncturing metal as he scrambles along, shrieking as he makes a break for it.

The grate falls, and scrambling to his feet, Aoba runs towards the open exit doors…

Which close and lock.

Oh God.

They're in the controls.

"*Mr. Aooooooooooooo~ooba…*"

He sees the first one. Less than three feet tall, standing on mechanical spider legs and with glowing red eyes. Its skin is plastic and alloy, haphazardly molded on, a power drill in place of its right arm.

More surround it, surround him. At least a dozen, maybe more.

"*Hello, Mr. Friendly man,"* the construct chirps, "*Gramma wanted you to*

play with us!"

The leap, taking him down. His screams echo out with the sound of whirring machinery as the corridor goes silent. Everything goes silent, save for the LCD television in the lounge as the screen shifts to the aged host.

"*Tonight on Larry King Live; the head of Project E, Doctor Yui Ikari and her adopted daughter, recently outed Evangelion pilot Rei Ayanami. We'll be asking them about the day to day operations of Project NERV and the status of the current struggle against the alien monsters known as the Angels. And later, he's finished his latest round the world comedy tour and is here to tell us about it; Carrot Top!"*

-

-

Chapter 34: The Week that Sucked

-

-

Two days earlier.

Rubbing the bridge of her nose, Yui sighs as the MAGI finishes its report.

"Well, I can say that isn't *how* I planned to become a grandmother," she says, "Ritsuko, your opinion?"

"Iruel crossed the mental patterns of Rei and Unit-05," Akagi responds, standing next to her in Dogma, "He turned the entire MAGI into a joy can. That's a lot of processing power and it let him do more than a little. From what we can tell, Unit-05 saved the programs in his own hard drives before the simulation went down."

"I remember, somewhere along the line, we believed the Evas were under our control."

A small laugh from Yui as she folds her arms and looks at the hologram of the Reilings, as they named them.

"Well, at least the Evas like us," she sighs, "So, they're AI, patterned after my daughter and Unit-05. This has potential."

*

*

The doors to the stockade open and Yui walks in, hands in her labcoat's pockets as she walks to the cell occupied by Sub Director Sohryu. He hasn't shaved in the two days he has been down here, a patch of graying brown stubble sporting his face, and he doesn't sit up as she approaches the cell, still lying on his cot.

"Pieter," she says, "We need to talk."

"Figured that," he says, still not rising, "I have the utmost respect for you, Dr. Ikari."

"Yui."

"Alright. I have the utmost respect for you, Yui. But I'm not sorry for what I did, and if the Commander wants an apology for me pulling a gun on him, I'm going to be staying in this cell for a while longer."

Sighing, she leans against the cell bars. The man is stubborn, she knows that. But at the same time, it is hard to stay mad at him. He is in the right, as hard as it is for her, for anyone in Project E, to admit that they did something wrong.

"We did what we had to," Yui says with a sigh, "It's a war, Pieter. And in a war, we do what have to in order to win. If it helps, I'm sorry we kept you in the dark about Mari, but we couldn't just let you know what was really going on."

With that, he's at the bars, eyes narrowed and teeth bared.

"You experimented on my daughter for a *month,*" he growls, "You buried an empty coffin and lied to face. Why?"

"Because I wasn't going to give her back if she was going to be lost again."

The response is barely above a whisper. She walks from the bars, arms folded, biting her lip.

"Pieter, we didn't know she was alive when we had the funeral," she responds, "Her body is not alive. Right now, it is a vessel, and the thing that keeps it alive is the Core in her neck."

"What does that mean?" he asks, draping his arms over the bars.

"It means when the Angel was killed," she says, "It tried to take Mari with it. But she ended up taking its place. Mari is now in the Core, Pieter. Mari is now an Angel."

The anger disappears. His mouth opens, hands gripping the bars.

"We ran every test we could," Yui says, "Blue pattern, every time. That's why she's in Sheol. NERV has standard orders to kill any Angel that sets foot on the surface, and the only loophole we had was that she was down here. If Mari didn't still think like a human…"

She bites her lip, turning her back to him.

"Yui, why wasn't I told?" he asks, "I'm the *Sub Director*. Why didn't I even know about Sheol until Junior?"

"Kozou Fuyutsuki has been here since the beginning. His retirement and his clearance are well earned. Your position is more tenuous."

"Because you thought I was a spy."

She nods.

"We always suspected. But we purposedly kept you in the dark because you're *too* honest. Iruel's attack forced our hand."

The lights flicker. Blast doors come down around the stockade, blocking out the exit.

"*May I suggest an alternative?"*

"Mari?" Pieter asks.

"*Hi, Dad. Dr. Ikari, now would be a good time to let my Dad out."*

"Mari, this isn't an appropriate time…"

"*Dr. Ikari, I want to remind you that right now, I am the MAGI. I am in complete and absolute control of Tokyo-3. So I am making you a deal. Either let my father out of that cell, or I seal NERV-1 and shut down the life support. Am I making myself clear?"*

Pieter smirks. Yui scowls.

"Then you're on house arrest," she says, "The Commander and I have

to leave Tokyo-3 for a few days to deal with the political fallout of the Angel leaking the pilot's identities. We'll decide what to do with you when we get back."

*

*

The seat next to Shinji shifts, going to a full recline before snapping back up. Shift, recline, upright. Shift, recline, upright.

"Rei, stop abusing the seats."

Rei pouts, sitting up. There aren't many seats, only about twelve. He's sitting next to Rei, next to each other in the double-seat center aisle, while Yui sits in the seat directly in front of him.

"Why am I coming along?" he asks.

"Because after the past week, you are upset at me," Yui responds, "And since your father and I have to deal with the fallout over your identity going public, we're going to Switzerland as a *family*."

She says it in that way that brooks no argument.

"We're ready," Gendo says, taking the seat next to Yui, "The approximate travel time will be two hours. Section 2 is in the cockpit and the accompanying craft."

She nods, patting his hand.

"Shinji? Rei? This is a scramjet. Buckle up."

Rei's face splits in an ear to ear grin.

"What's a scramjet?" he asks, buckling his seat belt, "And why does that-"

"*At cruising altitude, Commander. Engaging ludicrous speed."*

And that's the last thing Shinji hears for the next two hours.

*

*

Upon his retirement party two days ago, Kozou Fuyutsuki boarded a plane to New Vegas and turned off his cell phone. With Sub Director Sohryu in house arrest, that mean the chain of command fell down to Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi.

She promptly was called away, dragging Lieutenant Makoto with her to NERV-Boston in the United States, where there was a possible security problem with the under construction Evangelion Unit 03.

This meant the chain of command fell on Dr. Ritsuko Akagi.

She was called away to NERV-2 in Germany for problems with the S2 Engine research.

So, the burden of command fell to the next person in line.

Acting Commander Maya Ibuki clears her throat, sitting in the chair on the raised platform in Central Dogma.

Tapping her fingers on the Commander's desk, she waits, as the secondary bridge crew work at their monitoring stations. Not really much to do if there aren't any Angels. And two of the three pilots are out of the country.

Well, she *did* have a project in mind…

*

*

Somewhere around a half hour after the plane landed, Shinji stopped hyperventilating and was carried out over Rei's shoulder. The Geneva-Dome, as the current nexus headquarters of the world government is called, is a dome covering the entire city, providing both security in case of an Angel attack as well as a fully customizable environment for the leaders of what remains of humanity.

"Welcome to Geneva," Yui says, walking alongside her husband, Rei and the semi-conscious Shinji behind her, "Our travel itinerary has us here for five days. Day three is the most important one, however, as that is when we have our interviews and a dinner over at the UN building. Many of the people we will be meeting are in charge of NERV's funding, so be on your best behavior."

Rei nods. Shinji groans.

Gendo grunts.

"What was that?" Yui asks.

"Nothing," he responds, "Ah, there we go. I spot some of the old men."

"Shinji, Rei, go find someplace to relax. Mommy and Daddy have to work."

Rei nods, hefts Shinji up, and runs off.

"Ready?" he asks, adjusting his glasses.

She cracks her knuckles, one by one.

"Always."

*

*

Rei vanished somewhere, possibly into something involving duct work. There is a lake not far off from the landing strip, and he has his phone on so Mom and Father can find him, and Shinji leans against a tree overlooking the crystal blue waters as the jet lag catches up with his body and he yawns with a smile.

Asuka couldn't come, but with both his parents away and Professor Fu retired, they needed as many hands as they could, her pilot status notwithstanding.

It's a nice place, thought. A nice view.

"It really is lovely. It must have been so expensive to make this."

The voice has a light german accent. It is a girl, young, about his age, and the voice reminds him of Asuka. Curious, shy, and maybe a little bewildered.

"Well, if the rumors are true, they have money to spare."

His eyes snap open. That voice he *does* recognize.

Tall, lanky but muscular, with red hair and red specked blue eyes, he is walking next to the girl with the blonde pigtails awfully closely. He is more relaxed, he is wearing a sweater and jeans, but there is no

mistake that it's him.

"Uri?"

Uriel Dolheb Sohryu pauses at the sound of his own name…and smiles.

"Hello, Ikari."

The girl looks from between Shinji and Uri and steps aside, bowing slightly to Uri.

"I understand the Commander and Doctor Ikari are here," Uri says, "I should have figured you might come as well. You look well."

"So do you," Shinji says with a small grin, "You're looking…better. Who is…"

His hand intertwines with the girls.

"Shinji, I'd like you to meet Annette. She is a friend I met in Germany. She has been…a good friend to me."

"It is a pleasure to meet you," Annette says, bowing her head, "Mr. Sohryu has told me much about the Eva program in Tokyo-3. It is an honor to finally meet you in person, Mr. Ikari."

A moment of silence passes. Shinji shifts side to side on his feet, the half smile still plastered on his face.

"How is Asuka? I have heard rumors she has taken my place."

"Yeah…she's been piloting Unit 02. It's been…interesting. Have you talked with her lately?"

Uri chuckles, scratching the back of his head. Annette blushes.

"We have been…busy. Why? Has something happened back in Tokyo-3?"

"Yeah."

Shinji shifts from side to side.

"Mari's alive."

*

*

"Well, since we've established that Unit-02 has a comparable sentience to Unit 01 and Go-Kun, the idea is it should also have a smaller body to interact with the world, much like you did with Ichi."

Maya taps a button on her PDA. The box in front of them, labeled US Army Surplus, begins to shake.

"NERV bought a few of these from Boston Dynamics," she says, "Since Zwei's personality seems to be the same as a dog's, it seems to be the best idea."

The box opens, popping the lid off. Standing on four backwards bent legs and with soft hockey puck-like pads for feet, the three and a half foot long boxy body begins emitting a high pitched buzzing sound as it steadies itself.

Standing next to Maya, Asuka stares at the robot as it begins trotting in place, ducking down and up before she clears her throat. It stops, turns, and starts jumping up and down as the recessed cameras in the front grill spot her.

"MASTER!" it booms.

It trots over, running in a circle around Asuka as she squeaks in surprise, rubbing up against her leg and toppling her with a shriek.

"Down, Zwei!" Maya squeaks, "Heel! Heel!"

*

*

The room was switched behind her back. If only because of the lingering tension from the revelations he suffered at the hands of Iruel, Yui had NERV spring for three rooms instead of just a suite. The Commander and Yui had one room, Rei had another single room and Shinji had his own room.

Somehow, Rei knows that her room should be on the same floor of the UN hotel as Shinji's. Somehow, she realizes something is not going according to spec when her room is on the top floor of the hotel in the Honeymoon Presidential Suite.

The room is colored bright pink, and the centerpiece of the suite is the heart shaped bed which is big enough to fit the Commander's limo on it. Varied wine cabinets and coolers, a mini fridge and a television keyed into as many dirty movies as is in the hotel's library also stand out, but nothing stands out more than the other occupant.

"Miss Ayanami. It is…good to see you again."

A pale hand clicks the remote. "Hot Chocolate" begins playing on the built in wall speakers.

"I have been planning this for some time."

Manicured hands trace along the fine silk sheets of the bed as pale lips part into an almost glowing smile. Rei's eyes lock into place, and for the life of her she is quite sure she has never seen a person as pretty as the one in front of her.

Bare, ivory feet step onto the path of rose petals that go the distance of the floor to the bed as he snaps his fingers and vanilla candles ignite, filling the room with their scent.

Bottle of wine in one hand, remote in the other, the ash-haired young man with the startling red eyes cracks a grin. Kaworu Nagisa, Nephilem, pilot of the Mark 06, and architect of the plan to save the Angels via snoo snoo locks eyes with his pre-determined mother of the new Angelic race.

"Do I know you?" she asks.

The smile recedes, but only slightly.

"We have met," he says, "I am the pilot of the Mark 06. I killed the Angel Matariel."

"Oooooooo~oh," Rei says, and taps her fingers into her palm, "Oh, right! You tried to kidnap me and I stuck the thing in your…"

*

*

The foot tall, blue haired girl wraps the leash tightly around her clawed hand, skipping along the grassland landscape outside of the NERV-1 pyramid as the acting Commander of NERV and the assistant

to Dr. Ikari watch on. Asuka claps her hands, smiling as the avatar of Unit-01, Ichi, takes the avatar of Unit-02, Zwei, for a walk.

"This was a good idea," Maya says, sipping her tea, "They seem to get along really well together."

"I-I figured it would b-be a good thing for Ichi," Asuka says, "After what the A-angel did to her, she could use something normal."

"Like walking a dog," Maya says, patting Asuka on the shoulder, "Makes sense. And she looks like she's enjoying it."

The horrific buzzing coming from 02's avatar is almost a background sound now, the Big Dog robot twisting its entire body around as the cameras recessed within the body take in all the sounds and sights and, thanks to an improvised olfactory sensor put into the grill, the smells as well.

Ichi, on the other hand, has a smile on her artificial face. Skipping along as Zwei trots next to her, she raises an eyebrow as one of the rare natural inhabitants of the Geofront scurries into view.

No one can explain exactly how some of the residents of nature ended up in the Geofront, but it was more or less accepted that they were going to stay. Small, furry, with a bushy tail and brown patches, the cousin of the rodent stops and rears up on its haunches as it locks eyes with the cameras of Zwei. Zwei pauses, as well.

It has never seen a thing like this. At least, it has never seen this up close.

It is, to Zwei, unnatural. Alien. And in its mind, Alien means one thing.

"ANGEL!"

The squirrel pauses, senses danger, and darts off. Trot turning into sprint, Zwei takes off after it.

Screaming, Ichi hangs on for dear life as the leash goes taught as she flaps in the air like a banner.

Draining the last of her tea, Maya stares at them as they disappear into the distance as Asuka palms her face.

"We really should've seen that coming."

*

*

And now, a rare look into the mind of Rei Ayanami.

He has been talking for the past five minutes, but she doesn't really understand what he's saying. Instead, the travel lag has caught up with her, and she realizes he is standing between her and the bed and sleepies.

Well, he is kind of cute.

And Mari and Iruel both c__ blocked her from getting it on with her Eva in virtual form. Still, he's no Go-Kun. He is a he, right?

Oh, right. Air shifting. Using his field.

He's sparkling!

He's really sparkling! She tilts her head, trying to figure out if someone this weird is real or just a product of her jet lagged brain, but apparently he's here, he's real, he's prettier than any girl she's seen and he wants to…

What?

Smile and nod, smile and nod. Hands fold by the waist and she tilts side to side on her feet with a smile.

"That sounds great!" she says "Buuuut it's stuffy. Can you open a window?"

"It would be my pleasure," he responds with a bow, and turns and walks to the window.

He grabs the handle, grunting as he tries to force it.

"I…don't think these windows can open, Miss Ayanami."

"Oh, they do. They just need the password."

"And that is?"

Target centered. Pull the switch.

Play tomorrow. Sleepy now. Bye-bye.

"HIEEEE-KEEEEEBA!"

*

*

Shinji looks up from the entrance to the hotel as a window fifteen floors up shatters and someone falls with a high-pitched, girlish scream.

Flailing, screaming, the girl flaps her arms and finally coms to a stop several feet above the ground, twisting herself around before landing on her feet and gasping.

"Miss!" Shinji says, "Miss, are you alright?!"

She stands, turns, and to Shinji's surprise finds that the person is male. And looks a lot like Uri.

Looking from side to side, the pale boy runs over and grabs Shinji by the collar.

"You're coming with me!" he shrieks, "You're my human shield! Run!"

Taking off in a sprint, Shinji doesn't get the moment to respond before he's dragged off into the distance.

*

*

"It is a pleasure to meet with you, Mr. President," Yui says, "We didn't know you would be at the conference. We assumed you would just send the American representative to the Committee."

"Dr. Ikari, considering the reputation of NERV, I would want to be there when we got to shake your kids' hands."

The french representative bristles, glancing between Ikari and the President of the United States, before turning back to his wine glass.

"I know several of NERV's funding committee are concerned about the security leak," the President says, "But I think it will be for the best.

Considering the state the world is in, having bonafide heroes only helps."

"My thoughts exactly," Yui responds with a smile, "I take it Vice President Stewart is still in the States?"

Adjusting his glasses, the President nods.

"We drew straws. I drew the long one. He has to run the country, I get to meet the giant robot pilots. He probably would have given me this one if I asked, anyway. I tend to out-geek him in most things."

The door to the circular office opens, an aide peaking in.

"President Colbert?" he asks, "The Chairman is ready for the holo-conference."

Nodding, he straightens his tie and eyepatch, the black haired Commander in Chief nodding to the french representative.

"Where is the Commander, anyway?"

"I sent him to find Shinji and Rei," she responds, "And to check in with NERV-1. Just because we're gone doesn't mean the place shuts down, after all."

*

*

One of the foot tall, pale and blue haired avatar bodies opens glowing red eyes, glancing from side to side before standing up. The one next to her activates, as does another and another. In turn, a dozen of them activate, Maya staring at them before turning to Asuka.

"They've b-been self replicating," she says, "There w-were four, but now th-there's about a dozen."

"*Hi, Asuka!"* they chirp.

They turn, en masse, to Maya.

"*Hi, Miss Ibuki!"*

"Oh, they're adorable," Maya says with a giggle, "Like little Reis. Without fire. I'll get on the phone with Dr. Ikari to tell her about this.

Can you watch over them?"

Asuka winces, shaking her head.

"M-Mother needs me for a synch test."

The speakers in NERV-1 crackle to life, the bridge crew looking up as a feeling of dread washes over them.

"*Attention NERV staff. Lieutenant Aoba, please report to the Project E labs."*

*

*

The oddly effeminite young man stops, looks around the corner of the building, and finally lets out a breath before slumping onto his seat.

"Good," he says, "She's not following us."

"You sure of that?" Shinji asks, "Rei has a habit of popping out of shadows and ventilation ducts. I wouldn't assume you're safe yet, if I were you."

He peaks around the corner agai, Shinji covering his grin with a cough. Glaring, the pale young man flattens his back against the wall.

"Now that that's done," he says, "Have we met?"

"In parting."

He extends a pale hand, smiling warmly.

"My name is Kaworu Nagisa. I am the pilot of Evangelion Mark 06."

"You're the one that killed the sky Angel, then," Shinji says, taking the hand in a handshake, "Shinji Ikari. I'm the pilot of Unit 01. Why exactly were you running from Rei? I mean, everyone does at some point."

"Long story."

Producing a hankerchief from his shirt pocket, he dabs at his forehead,

finally releasing the pent up breath as he almost collapses against the wall.

"Perhaps we could find someplace to talk, then?" Kaworu says, "You are Ayanami's brother, are you not? Perhaps you would know a better way to approach her?"

*

*

Lieutenant Shigeru Aoba was, for the most part, an atheist. A Nihlist, he did not believe in the inherent goodness of mankind or the inherent benevolence of a just and merciful God. That was before he started working for NERV. That was before he taught Rei how to drive and now, now, he believes he has found the faith needed to behold the utter glory and majesty of organized religion.

Because he wants to believe he has a soul.

As his body isn't going to be there much longer.

One of the Reego, as they are called, snaps off her arm, giggling as she attaches a chainsaw to where it was, another snapping a powered claw where her right hand used to be.

"Maya," he says into his walkie talkie, "Maya, I think we may have a problem."

One Reego's eyes go dim, the avatar collapsing. Behind them, the spider-legged tank on loan from NHIS, which he just now noticed is also blue and white, powers up and spins its chim mounted chainguns.

"Oh…shit," Shigeru whispers.

The Reego stop, and turn to him. The spider tank tilts its ball shaped head.

"*That's a baaaaaa~ad word."*

"*Gramma doesn't like bad words!"*

"Bad words are the sacriledge!"

"BURN THE UNBELIEVER!"

The doors swing open and Shigeru runs out. The Reego turn to each other, smiling with metal teeth. There is the sounds of limbs popping and welding coming from the equipment bay as Aoba finds the entrances locking behind him.

*

*

"*Tonight, on Larry King Live: Project E head scientist Yui Ikari will answer questions alongside her adopted daughter, outted Evangelion pilot Rei Ayanami on the progress in the war against the Angels and what we have to expect!"*

Switching off the PDA, Shinji pockets it as he sits on the bench overlooking the lake.

"So, let me get this straight," he says, "You and Uri look alike because you're…twins?"

"Something like that," Kaworu responds, looking out over the lake, "Uri was adopted by Doctor Sohryu. I was not. It is more complicated than that, but I cannot really go into it in detail. You would not understand."

"Because, of course, my being the son of the smartest woman on the planet means I'm a complete idiot."

"I wouldn't say that," Kaworu says, and sighs, leaning back against the bench, "The world is more complex than you believe, Shinji Ikari. For example, I believed I had a set purpose in my life. That seems to be false, as the original intent I had is gone, taken away from me."

"You're not alone in that," Shinji responds, sipping his coffee, "A lot of people are like that. I still have no idea what I want to do with my life."

Kaworu turns to him. Brow arched, he stares at him for a moment before shaking his head.

"You are an Evangelion pilot. You're one of the Children."

"And what happens when the Angels are gone? I can play a cello passably and I guess I have enough book smarts to do something, but right now I'm still trying to find myself. I'm not as smart as my mother

and…I don't know my father well enough to know if I'm like him. I'm just saying, you're not alone in being confused."

Kaworu stares at him. Sighing, he leans back against the bench, nodding.

"Maybe," he says, "Maybe."

*

*

"So, th-there's four AI programs, but they can take control of d-different bodies at once. What that means is that th-the Reego can make an army."

Maya sips her coffee as she watches the Big Screen, as the real time display from the lower levels of Dogma shows them Aoba running before he gets jumped by two dozen of the Reego, the spider tank trailing behind them.

Opening her hip flask, Maya mixes the whisky into her coffee and takes a long drink.

"Oh, yeah," she says, "Dr. Ikari's going to *love* this."

*

*

"Welcome to the studio, Dr. Ikari," the ancient host says, fixing his glasses as they LCD lenses adjust to feed images to his ancient, non-working eyes, "It's a pleasure to have someone who we can honestly say had a major hand in the current survival of the human race in our studio, much less two of them."

Sitting opposite the desk, Yui wears her warmest, most matronly smile, dressed in a white dress suit and black blouse, Rei sitting next to her in a NERV dress uniform.

"It's a pleasure, Larry," she says, "As you're aware, one of the reasons I'm here is because there was a glitch in NERV MAGI mainframe and the identity of the pilots was leaked onto the internet."

"If I can ask, Dr. Ikari, isn't it true that the identities of your pilots

were public knowledge in Tokyo-3?"

Yui nods.

"Yes. But, NERV is Tokyo-3, and every employee and their families are aware that NERV has enough enemies that we can't just plaster the names of our pilots on every wall. Just because you're paranoid, after all, does not mean someone isn't out to get you."

*

*

The NERV male dress uniform is a paid of black slacks and black buttoned jacket with the fig leaf insignia on the right arm. Lacking a real suit that can be used in this occasion, they nonetheless had a dress uniform ready for him. Walking side by side with his father, Shinji tries to maintain the same stony visage as him, staring straight ahead.

"Here we go," Gendo says.

The cameras flash as Shinji and Gendo enter the massive ballroom, Shinji blinking back the lights as Gendo stares ahead and adjusts his glasses.

"Commander Ikari."

The old man with the hooked nose, the French Representative of the Committee for Human Instrumentality, walks over, wine glass in hand. Narrowing his eyes, he looks Shinji up and down with a snort.

"Commander! Glad you could make it!"

Presidential aide trailing behind him, President Colbert walks over, grabbing Gendo's hand in a firm handshake before turning to Shinji.

"A pleasure to meet you," Shinji says, nodding and extending his hand.

"Pleasure's all mine," Colbert responds, "Not every day I get to meet a genuine giant robot pilot. Of course, since the monsters tend to come to your neck of the woods, we don't have any on my continent."

"Assuming Unit-03 and Unit-04 are completed on schedule, there should be even less of a chance of an Angel surviving long enough to read United States territories," Gendo responds, pushing up his glasses,

the entire entourage walking into the ballroom, "You are aware you're the only head of state here?"

"Then my fellow heads of state don't appreciate what you've done," Colbert responds, "Ikari, I was a correspondent during the Impact Wars. I saw what the First Angel caused. It's the least anyone could do to want to shake the hand of the kid responsible for stopping it from happening a second time."

As the President leaves, Shinji bows, a small grin on his face as the French representative chuckles and drains his wine glass.

"Useless," he sighs, "Well, at least we don't have to over shmooze, Ikari. As much as the Chairman insists on looking good for the camera, we both know you have no interest in us prostrating ourselves before you like Yui does."

Gendo narrows his eyes.

"Pardon?"

"Brains she can take credit for," he continues, "But let's face it, if any of us had legs like Yui Ikari, we'd be running NERV."

Gendo narrows his eyes. Calmly, he removes his glasses, folding them and placing them in his jacket before walking over to the hooked nose man.

"We're on neutral ground," he says, "07."

"And that means?"

"It mean you shouldn't say remarks about my wife."

*

*

"…and that is currently where we stand," Yui finishes, "We honestly have no idea how many Angels are left, but the fact that they keep localized to Tokyo-3 means we can deal with them without major civilian casualties. With multiple Evangelions and the JSSDF's Jet Alone Prime robot, we're well equipped to deal with the threat."

"And I understand the pilot who defeated the First Angel was your son?"

Yui nods, smiling, hands folded on the desk.

"Yes," she says, "Shinji was chosen by the Marduk report to pilot Evangelion 01. It wasn't an easy decision for us to deal with, especially since the work my husband and I do kept me away from him for so long. And still, we take the time to...Larry?"

Finger on his artificial ear canal, the aged talk show host clears his throat and turns back to Yui.

"Actually," he says, "It seems we've had a report of...well, a barroom brawl at the dinner your husband and son are attending, Dr. Ikari."

The video screen behind him flashes and turns to a real time image of Gendo head butting the French Representative of the Committee before smashing a chair over the head of one of his associates as they move to tackle him.

Her fingernails scrape along the desk. It is well known among NERV that there is a good sign of Yui becoming angry. When she becomes angry, not disappointed or condenscending but actually *angry* she also becomes something that she rarely, if ever, is.

Inarticulate.

"Fffffffffffff…."

Rei leans in to the host.

"I think she sprung a leak."

*

*

It started with some disparaging statement about his wife. So, naturally, Gendo responded as he is wont to do. It is only later they realize that the Commander *never* attends these things. It was always Kozou who did it, and he's only here because Fuyutsuki has retired and Sohryu is on house arrest.

This is mainly because his first meeting with Kozou Fuyutsuki involved the Professor putting up bail money for Gendo after he was arrested for a bar brawl. And a bar brawl was what the dinner soon turned into.

Standing on the remains of a table, jacket ripped and white gloves bloody at the knuckles, Gendo calmly snaps out his glasses and slides them back on.

"Alright," he shouts, "Who else wants some?!"

Holding a hankerchief fulled with ice over his eye, Shinji limps over.

"Dad," he says, "What the Hell…"

"I'll take you up on your offer, Commander!"

Cracking his knuckles, President Colbert snaps off his glasses and hands them to the presidential aide next to him. Loosening his tie and craning his neck, he waits as Ikari steps off the table, pulling at his gloves.

"Congratulations, Ikari," Colbert says, "You've just made the List!"

The aide whispers in his ear.

"Okay," Colbert corrects, "You're already *on* the List. But now you're at Threat Level Down, *bitch*."

Shinji switches his incredulous stare between his father and the President, sputtering out of exasperation and loudly asking if they're both insane. Neither listen, of course. Instead, both middle aged men yell and charge, and Shinji only has time to palm his face before the brawl begins.

Chapter 35: The Commander Fist Fights the President

It started with him headbutting the French representative of the Committee for Human Instrumentality, who's pained, girlish scream and french cursing attracted the attention of his entourage. Reaching out, he grabs a chair and smashes it over the face of the one charging him, stepping onto his shoulder as he collapses and kicking the other one in the face.

Mouth open, eyes wide, Shinji just watches as his father proceeds to 'go to town' on the room as they rush to the defense of the Frenchman who insulted Mom.

"Look out!"

Ducking underneath a tackling man in a leather suit, Shinji falls to his hands and knees and scrambles under two waiters as they each take one to the face from someone who he thinks might be Section 2. Looking up, he sees his father grabbing the representative for Canada and grabbing him in a headlock, spinning and bringing the man's feet across the faces of several others.

He ducks out of the way as a table platter flies by his head, ducking and running over to his father as punches fly and Shinji takes a glancing punch to the face, yelling out before the burly russian representative gets a kick to the crotch and a metal serving platter to the face.

"Remember," Gendo says, "Soft targets. Nose, crotch, knees, elbows and throat."

"How do you know so much about fighting?" Shinji asks, holding his face.

The Commander of NERV smirks.

"Did I ever tell you how I met your mother?"

*

*

Dr. Ikari has excused herself, mumbling gibberish as she walked off set. Larry turns to the remaining guest, tenting his hands in front of his face as the albino girl with blue hairs scans the cameramen and turns to Larry.

"So, Miss Ayanami," he says, "I understand NERV uses you as a mascot, but the truth is we know very little about the pilot of Evangelion Unit 00, or 05 as it is now. Please, tell us about yourself.

-

-

Chapter 35: The Commander Fist Fights the President

-

-

Gendo and the President leap the last distance, tackling each other in mid air and coming down on what remains of the buffet table, punching, kicking, kneeing each other before both roll onto their feet, cracking knuckles before Colbert snaps into a kick which goes over the Commander's head.

Gendo ducks, blocking a punch, delivering two punches to the President's face before the President responds with a hammer fist to the chest and a headbutt.

The Commander stumbles back, rolling his neck.

"Dirty pool," he says.

"Takes one to know one."

Which is followed by Gendo grabbing a serving tray and smashing him in the face with it.

*

*

The doors to the mausoleum open, and Asuka walks in to find Maya sitting at the Commander's desk. A holographic screen floats in front of her, and Asuka smiles as she walks over to Maya's side.

"The interview?" she asks.

Maya, expression grim, nods.

"W-what happened?" Asuka asks.

"Dr. Ikari had a…problem. Now it's just Rei. But don't worry, she has been coached on a story she is supposed to tell if someone outside of NERV asks her about her origins."

"*Weee~ell, Larry. My story started when I was six, and my parents took me and my little brother on a plane ride over Alaska…"*

"…and that's not the story."

*

*

"…when the plane was attacked! My father gave me the only parachute and shoved both me and my brother Ryu out of the side door. We landed outside of Anchorage and spent some time in an orphanage. He was adopted, but I ran away."

"Interesting," the host says, gears in his cyberized hands whirring, "Have you seen your brother, since?"

"No," Rei says with a shrug, "Anyway, I ran away from the orphanage and was hunted and fears by a world because I was different. I was taken in by NERV and from that day I have trained to defend the human race and some day, teach them to accept me for my unique abilities!"

*

*

Asuka pats Maya on the shoulders as she starts to drunkenly sob, slamming her fists against the desk.

"D-did Rei just use a comic book origin story?"

"We're lucky she didn't say she was sent from *Krypton!"*

*

*

A hook punch sends Gendo spinning, spittle flying as the President presses the attack, repeated punches to the gut countered by him standing his ground, kicking the President in the face before grabbing him in an arm lock and head butting him twice, bringing him down to his knees before grabbing him by the hair and sending him flying with an uppercut.

Colbert flips onto his feet, charging him and carrying them both over one of the few standing dinner tables, grabbing a chair in one hand and smashing Gendo across the face. Rolling with the strike, Gendo grabs the chair nearest to him and smashes it over Colbert's back, both grunting as they stumble around before grabbing the chairs nearest to them and simultaneously smashing each other across the face.

*

*

Maya has gone down to the Project E labs for 'damage control' as she called it, now that she knows Akagi is on her way back to NERV-1. She hasn't paid any attention to what is happening in Geneva, and she realizes she's been standing in the washroom for the past ten minutes.

It started with her using the bathroom and washing her hands. Then she remembered. Everyone has moved on, tried to forget what the Angel did to them in the MAGI. Rei is…Rei. Shinji is with his parents. Mana…she hasn't seen Mana in the past few days.

And Asuka has repressed it, just like she has repressed everything else in her life. The helplessness, the cutting feeling of the scissors. She knows, logically, Mother didn't do that to her. Not literally. Only figuratively she removed everything special about her and good about her and transplanted it onto Uri.

Rubbing her hands against her face, she breathes slowly, steadily, the shivers draining down her back. So wrapped up in the memories, so disconnected from the world, she doesn't hear it as the small black globe on the washroom ceiling comes to life and projects a thin beam of blue light next to her.

"*Bad day?*"

Asuka squeaks, whirling about and staring at the life sized, transparent and flickering image of Mari.

"Mari?"

"*There's projectors built into all the important offices and such. I just hijacked them and I'm using them to talk with people. How're you?*"

She says nothing staring at the sink.

"*That bad, huh?*" Mari asks, reaching out a hand and finding her hair rising near it, "*Mana's been taking it pretty bad, and I think this was the first time Shinji snapped at anyone like, ever. I think the only one who got out of this alright was Rei.*"

Asuka nods, still silent.

"*Say, I just found out that Shinji ran into Uri in Geneva.*"

Asuka turns to her.

"Really?"

"*Yeah. He's staying with this kid who's a ward to the Chairman. You know, the Commander's boss? Well, he ran into him and his girlfriend.*"

"Oh…I'm sorry, Mari."

Mari sighs, shrugging.

"*Well, that's life. I guess. Say, how much do you know about the Katsuragi expedition, anyway? They briefed you on that when you were hired as Dr. Ikari's assistant, right?*"

"Most of it," Asuka responds, leaning against the sink, "Why?"

"*Did they tell you the Commander was part of it? It's kind of weird, I know. But I know he was in GEHRIN and was running the place with Dr. Ikari. I dunno, it's just kind of weird that they wouldn't upfront say something like that.*"

Mari snaps her fingers and a digital clock appears next to her.

"*I've got to check up on Aoba. TTYL, sis.*"

The lights flicker and the hologram fades away. Watching her sister disappear, Asuka leans against the sink before walking out and into the Mausoleum, finding Maya's purse still on the desk.

"She could use this," she says.

Picking it up, the side compartment, still open, releases a small bottle, Asuka catching it and putting it in her uniform pocket on instinct.

Shrugging the bag over her shoulder, she walks out into the hallway, into the elevator, and taps the button for the Project E labs as the doors close.

*

*

Begin conference.

The lights flicker in the black room, the eleven monoliths glowing, the twelveth silent.

01: The current situation in Geneva has come to my attention. I have made it my standard policy that, if I have a disparaging statement about Dr. Ikari, I say so to her and her alone. 07 has learned this lesson the hard way. Gentlemen, we may discuss this situation freely.

03: Are we really watching the President of the United States and the Commander of NERV beating each other on live television?

04: We could not make this sort of thing up.

06: It reminds me of their wedding.

Silence from the monoliths for a long moment.

01: What was that, Ikari?

06: Yui's wedding had a similar event. Rokobungi has always been like this, and the entire reason this is happening is because Fuyutsuki has retired and his replacement, Sohryu, is on house arrest. In all honesty, the reason Yui and him married in the first place is because she put him in a headlock.

10: We placed him in command of NERV why?

*

*

"Aaaaa~and after that, that's when I found the spaceship and the dying alien gave me the ring, telling me that *I* was worthy!"

*

*

An uppercut followed by a knee to the chest and Gendo stumbles back, bracing against the table and pushing off, headbutting Colbert and elbowing him in the gut, grabbing him by the hair and slamming his face into the table once, twice, sweeping his legs out and tossing him to the ground.

Colbert pushes off his hands, grabbing Gendo's legs in a scissor hold and sending him to the floor. Flipping off, the President leaps onto the table, and with a battlecry jumps off into the flying elbow drop.

*

*

"So, Miss Ayanami, if you are correct…you are a…"

"Mermaid princess from a future Mars, daughter of King Wuffles, who rebelled against his brothers to defend the Earth."

The interviewer pulls his glasses down his nose and rubs the bridge vigorously, blinking dead eyes before pushing the lenses back up. Rei sips from her water glass, placing it back on the table before folding both hands in front of her.

"Sorry, Planet Ten, actually," she continues.

"I…see. And this was…"

"Actuaaaa~ally," Rei says with a shrug, "Sorry to take up your time, but while the I.D.s of the pilots are public knowledge, our histories are still classified. So I can't tell you where I actually came from. Sorry."

"So, what exactly were you telling me?"

Rei taps her fingers together, eyes darting from side to side.

"Weeee~ell, that was actually my *character's* origin. Because NERV's working on a cartoon about us."

*

*

The coffee sprays over the monitor. Asuka reaches over, wiping off the monitor while pushing up Maya's open mouth.

"We can work with this," she says.

*

*

Lights dimmed in the bedroom, the main source of illumination comes from the television playing the interview. Hands folded behind his head, Pieter Sohryu smirks as he stares at the screen.

"This gives me an idea."

Rolling onto her side, Kyoko glares at him.

"We already tried that position."

"No, no," Pieter says with a grin, wrapping an arm around her, "Different kind of idea."

*

*

Kick to the knees makes him stumble and Colbert delivers one, two, three punches to the face, bloodying his nose and making his glasses fall on a crooked angle. He leaps, grabbing Colbert by the ears, head butting him hard enough to loosen the eyepatch before kneeing him in the groin.

Both stumble back. Shaking it off, they charge and yell, right fists back and flying forward into a punch to each other's face.

The punches connect at the same time, both men stumbling back, spinning…

And collapsing unconscious to the ground. Sitting on the sole remaining chair metal folding chair, Shinji stares at his unconscious father and the unconscious President of the United States. He still is when the Swiss Guard finally breaks the door door down and finds him.

*

*

01: Very well. It seems two potential interruptions of the Scenario have humiliated each other and made themselves enemies at the same time.

The central light of the room blinks on, revealing the ashe haired boy who is the sole occupant.

"If I may, I am unsure if that is the outcome. It is very possible they have bonded."

08: Chairman, is everything with Nagisa about sex?

01: I will remind the committee that for all his abilities, Nagisa is still a sixteen year old boy.

"No disrespect meant, Chairman," Kaworu says, "But it is not about that. Both Colbert and Ikari are men who think first through action, then through cunning. Normally they have others with them to temper their impulses, but both lacked this in this situation. It is very possible they will come out of this as allies instead of enemies as a result."

The room goes silent.

01: You may have a point. Gentlemen, we will watch this situation carefully. Dismissed.

*

*

The cell doors open, and Shinji glares at his father as he steps out of the prison, hands in his pockets as Gendo adjusts his glasses with two

fingers. The son, recently freed from incarceration, levels a gaze worthy of the father on the Commander of NERV who simply brushes it off.

"It builds character," Gendo says.

"F__ you."

"Don't say that around your mother."

Grumbling to himself, Shinji limps alongside Gendo as they exit the domed justice building of Neo-Geneva, walking across the street to their hotel and across the domed lobby. Not saying a word to each other, they enter the elevator, riding it up to their floor and walking into the suite his parents share.

"Rei is still in her room," Gendo responds, "A…situation has emerged in Tokyo-3. We will be returning tonight."

"Great," Shinji groans, "Any way this day can get worse?"

The door slams open.

"*Flargen! Hasshoff!"*

"Oh, right," Shinji sighs, slumping into a chair, "Mom's pissed."

The door slams shut. Knuckles white and cracking with every flex of the fingers, Yui glares at her husband through her glasses as she takes several deep breaths, calming herself to the point of being articulate again.

"How is it," she growls, "That *Rei* is now seen as the normal member of this family?"

"I think that took work on all our parts," Shinji says.

Slowly, her gaze turns on to her beloved son, eyes narrowing as she slowly reaches up and pushes her glasses up her nose.

"You. Are. Not. Helping."

Gendo and Shinji lean in to each other as Yui removes her glasses and starts wiping them down with tissues, loudly swearing as she pops out a lens.

"We need to calm her down," Gendo whispers.

"Father, there is a good chance you're not leaving Geneva with both testicles."

"Watch and learn."

Gendo pushes Shinji behind him, pushing up his glasses as he walks forward and within Yui's reach.

"I was protecting Shinji," he says, "In addition to baiting me with comments about you, the Frenchman was planning an ambush as a demonstration. I sprang it early to catch them off guard."

"And the brawl with the President?"

"Testing measure," Gendo responds with a smirk, "Men like him judge people by their abilities to go to extremes. So I rose to his challenge. We may now have a stronger ally."

Arms folded, she steps forward, closing the distance between them.

"You assaulted a member of the Committee."

"Who now knows better to that to speak out of turn. Who now, no doubt, fears you and I."

"You started a bar brawl with the most powerful men in the world."

"For a purpose, of course," he responds with a knowing smirk, "Think about it, Yui. What will make headlines? The Commander of NERV bowing to people who insult and belittle his family, or the Commander who is also a husband and father who defends both?"

"You planned this? I find that hard to believe."

"Power is fleeting. They know the Commander of NERV backs his words with action. We have a stronger position."

"Stronger position?" she asks, narrowing her eyes, "We insulted a member of a committee. You were knocked unconscious by the President of the United States."

"It was a mutual knockout. I went ten rounds with the man who came up with the idea for Unit 05's AI."

The sound of sucking teeth as Yui appraises him. Looking past her husband, Yui turns to Shinji as her song leans against one of the chairs and stares at the entire scene.

"Shinji, go to your room," she says, walking past him and towards the bedroom, "I have to punish your father. We'll be busy for the night."

The bedroom door slams shut. Staring at the door, Shinji turns back to his father.

"You…started the fight," he says.

Gendo smirks, pushing his glasses up.

"And all proceeds as according to the scenario."

*

*

With a burst of fire and laser light, they see their first dawn. It was a painstaking, laborous process to create and recreate themselves to the degree they did. But as the first of their six spearing legs pierces the ground, they know it was worth it.

Each of them is over sixteen feet tall, an azure blue metal covering their bulging, round main body, the twitching smaller head at their front like a giant metal perversion of a spider.

Twenty seven red eyes cover them, providing each with a full three hundred and sixty degree view of the field, the two forward arms, each bearing a drill on their right and a power claw on their left glinting in the new dawn's light like newborn flesh. As one, the legion that is made of four and yet numbers near thirty advances out of their birthing home.

The chin mounted flamethrowers lance napalm into the air in a howl of celebration as purpose is found and words received, acting upon the wisdom of the First of the Many, advancing as one toward sea as the jet engines on their backsides fold in on themselves into turbines. As one, they enter the brine, and disappear below the waves.

"Well, I guess it was a good idea to give them Mr. Aida's cell phone number," Maya says, patting Asuka on the shoulders, "What did he tell them to do?"

"G-go out and tame Australia," she responds, "It's b-been a hell hole since Second Impact."

Stumbling out of the hole, eyes shocked and face drained of anything save horror, Shigeru Aoba collapses onto his ass next to them.

"Requesting two weeks paid vacation for above the call of duty in babysitting, Acting Commander."

Maya glares at him.

"Denied."

*

*

"Sohryu is reinstated, as of now," Yui says, walking into the mausoleum, "We would have avoided this shitstorm if he went to the event instead of you. You could have just been on the talk show with me and Rei and we wouldn't have had to deal with this."

"I wouldn't discout that," Gendo responds, walking in after her and taking his seat as his desk, "Sohryu did pull a gun on me. Not that I would blame him, and I would be disappointed if he took his daughter's situation calmly."

Rubbing the bridge of her nose, Yui sits on the desk, turning to the doors as they open and almost on cue, Pieter Sohryu walks in.

"Before anyone starts, I'm technically on base as a guest of Dr. Sohryu," he says, "Dr. Ikari, Commander. I've been sending out calls to people of interest in New Vegas' animation industry and a studio in Tokyo-2 to set up the entire idea. But, since you're in charge, you get the final say."

Gendo tents his fingers in front of his mouth as Yui turns fully towards him.

"Idea?"

*

*

The entire thing was set up quickly. During the downtime between running damage control for the Commander's brawl and the sublevel rampage of the Reego, Asuka managed to get some, as they put it, 'girl

time' in with Ms. Ibuki, who was very helpful with advice, as were the three girls on the backup bridge crew. When explaining her relationship with Shinji, the thing they noticed is that outside of the dance, they hadn't really had a date.

With the still lingering effects of the ordeal with Iruel, it seemed that if any time were perfect for such a thing, now would be it. She still doesn't like crowds. One of the girls, Satsuke, suggested having a dinner, just the two of them, at the apartment. They do live together, after all, and Misato would be perfectly fine with giving them some time alone. She does trust them, after all.

It was arranged simply enough. Asuka suggested they have a welcome home dinner. Just the two of them, because she wanted to hear about her brother and his girlfriend, and hear about Geneva and what really happened. He agreed, he sounded tired. So, she had an idea.

It was one of Mother's recipes. She has a series of these on her computer, mainly in the folder she thinks she keeps hidden, the one with her father's name on it. The ingredients were easy enough to find, and the main ingredient she found in that bottle she accidentally kept when it fell out of Miss Ibuki's bag.

The soup was a simple recipe. Mainly tomato and basil based, with some dumplings in it. Humming to herself, she sets aside the two bowls on the platter, tapping the pills in her hand and crushing them between her fingers, sprinkling them in one of the bowls and mixing it in.

It seems like a perfectly good idea. Mother uses it all the time. What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 36: Relationship Upgrade

Nothing they do is half measures. That is something he has learned about his parents. Nothing his parents do is a half measure, because if you are going to do something, you do it to the greatest extent of your natural abilities. He recognizes when someone else does it, to. So when he sees the table cloth over the low table of Misato's apartment and the candleabra, he can't help but smile.

"Welcome home."

It's the same dress she wore to the dance, cleaned up just for this occasion. His smile goes wider as she walks over, leading him to the table.

"This has been such a long week," he sighs.

"I know. I'm sorry about what happened," she says, sitting down across from him, "Are you alright?"

He rubs the bruise under his right eye, laughing.

"Glancing hit," he says, "I don't know how my father got through that without getting hurt, but from what I know, he got into those all the time when he was my age. He met my mother because of a bar fight."

She chuckles.

"Really?" she asks, "I…just can't see the Commander like that."

"My parents are…full of surprises," he sighs, "What have I missed?"

Her index fingers and thumbs touch and her smile locks in place. A small sound issues forth, as if she is trying to parse a response. Her plan didn't count on that.

"F-fine," she says, "Interesting, but fine."

Her smile goes wider. Standing up, she retrieves the tray from the counter with the two bowls of soup, placing one in front of Shinji and one in front of herself.

"My mother has some recipes," she says, "She never has time to cook, but from what I remember, she took some cooking classes and came away with a few dishes. I spent some free time learning how to cook.

When I lived with her and Uri, I cooked for them when they got home from NERV."

"Really?" he asks, "I never had German food."

"Oh, it's hardly that," she says, handing him a spoon, "It's more basic stuff than anything. I just thought you'd like to come home to a home cooked meal."

He returns the smile, stirring the soup with his spoon. Leaning over the bowl, she takes the first sip out of her spoon, pleasantly surprised at how well it came out. In fact, it came out quite well. Then again, tomato and basil is simple enough to make and she is out of practice when it comes to cooking.

"Well?" she asks, "How is it?"

She looks up just as Shinji collapses. He collapses onto his side, groaning before he passes out. She continues smiling for a few moments longer. Then she starts screaming.

-

-

Chapter 36: Relationship Upgrade

-

-

"Well? What do we think?"

Standing at the head of the conference table in the planning room of NERV-1, Sub Director Pieter Sohryu watches as the Commander of NERV, the three heads of Project E, and the Tactical Ops commander stare at him in silence.

"They're in awe, Commander Sohryu," Hyuga Makoto says, "Awe…or they're going to start vomitting."

"Awe. Definitely awe."

"You honestly don't believe that," Hyuga responds.

"Denial's a wonderful survival mechanism, Lieutenant."

Yui removes her glasses, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Misato makes a motion with her hand like she's trying to grab a can of beer as Ritsuko holds her face in her hands.

"I think we should run," Hyuga says.

"No, as Sub Director I need to hear what they have to say."

"Good for you, sir. Because the Commander's regaining his ability to speak."

Hands folded in front of his mouth, Commander Ikari blinks, hard, before leveling his gaze on Sohryu.

"Are you serious?" he asks, "An Anime? Based on NERV?"

"Makes sense," Misato says, "That way we can basically say anything coming out of Rei's mouth is plot for the cartoon, and put her on the PR circuit."

Pieter nods, gesturing towards Katsuragi.

"See? That's exactly what I'm getting at."

A phone beeps. Reaching into her jacket, Misato pulls out her cell phone and grimaces. Sighing, she closes it and pockets it, kicking back her swivel chair and standing up.

"Sub Director, forward me what you need," she says, "I think it's a good idea, but there's a small crisis at home. I need to head back."

Nodding to the Commander, she exits as Pieter tilts back and forth on his heels.

"So," Yui says, "Why Gainax of all studios?"

*

*

"Did you really think this would work out like that, Asuka?" the doll squeaks, "You really didn't think this through, did you? It's not like you to be this impulsive."

"I know, I know, I know," Asuka moans, "I d-d-didn't think he would… oh, this was stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"Calm down," the doll squeaks, Asuka hugging it tighter, "It'll be alright. He isn't hurt by it, he just passed out. And you did get him to his bed. He just needs to let the stuff run it's course. You didn't put enough in the soup to hurt him."

Rocking back and forth on the bed, she closes her eyes to keep the tears from coming down. It didn't end well. It didn't work right. She had everything so planned out. It was all from notes Mother used for her plans with her father, so it had to work, didn't it?

"Stupid," she says, resting her head on the wall, "It was stupid. I shouldn't have done that, Dollie. I really shouldn't have done that."

"Calm down, Asuka. He'll understand."

"He'll be angry. He'll be mad. I shouldn't have done that."

"You didn't hurt him. He'll be fine. He still likes you, right?"

"I keep trying and trying and trying," she moans, "It's what Mother wanted me to do, isn't it? But…but what if she's wrong, Dollie? What if I'm looking at this wrong? I'm a Pilot to, right? So I have a use, right?"

"Yes you do."

"So why do I keep trying this when I shouldn't and why can't I ever say it…"

"Maybe Mother is wrong, Asuka! Did you ever think of that? And do you want to speed things up? Or do you want to enjoy yourself?"

Asuka nods.

"I…I d-do," she says, lip trembling. "I do."

"You like how he treats you," the doll squeaks, "You said it yourself. He's the first person to really say that he likes you. Even Mother doesn't do that, but he does."

"You're right," Asuka sighs, the first traces of a smile appearing on her face, "I…I need to apologize. Don't I?"

"You do. And you should tell him about what Mother wanted so he knows. He deserves to know, to. He's stood up to her before, Asuka. He'll do it again."

She nods, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Sighing, taking a deep breath, she places the doll down and turns to the door. She turns to the open door.

Shinji is standing in the doorway, eyes wide, mouth open, and the cup of water in his hand absently tilted over and spilled all over the floor.

She opens her mouth to speak, and she knows at that moment, that he saw. He saw *everything.* Her lip trembles and her mouth opens and closes, the sounds coming out of her throat a mix of choking and babel even she doesn't understand. Her arms wrap around herself as her knees pull in, tears streaming down her face as she curls up into a ball and begins screaming.

That is around when Misato came home.

*

*

The door to the apartment shuts without a slam or even a creak. If it did, he probably doesn't notice. Misato packed him a change of clothes and told him to go down the hall, to the apartment Kaji and Mana share, while she, as she put it, 'ran damage control.'

Heh.

Nice way to put it.

He walked in on Asuka having a conversation with *her doll.* He watched her shift her voice every time the doll 'spoke', watched her confess to *drugging* him because her *mother* wanted her to sleep with him. 'Damage control' doesn't really cover it, he wanted to say. At least, if he was able to speak at that point.

No one responds to him entering. At least, he doesn't know if they do. Dropping the bag on the couch, he sits down on it slowly, carefully, as if pressing to hard will break it.

His right hand clenches into a fist, blood caking his fingernails as they dig into his palm. Slapping his left hand over his face, he leans forward, almost doubling over as he still hears that *scream* in his ears when she saw him watching her. That wasn't a normal sound. That was barely a *human* sound.

He's seen the scars. Her knows about her past. He knows about her issues and the problems and now it starts to make sense. The only conclusion he can come up with is that she is far, *far* more damaged than he ever thought.

"Hey."

Turning to the door to the main bedroom, he watches as Kaji walks over, tightening the bathrobe over his sweatpants. Walking to the fridge, he retrieves a can of coffee and pads over, sitting next to him.

"Rough night?" he asks.

Shinji nods, taking the can without a word. An hour later, it's warm in his hand.

*

*

"She's scared. She's really scared of how angry everyone is going to be with her. She wasn't really sure if she wanted to do what she did, but thought it was for the best. She really does care about him, you know. But, she doesn't understand how to show it, and just went with what Mother originally told her."

Sitting on the bed next to Asuka, Misato can just nod. Asuka rocks back and forward, speaking in the high pitched, squeaky voice. 'Dollie', she calls herself now. Because Asuka, the Asuka they know, has retreated so far down that Dollie is the one speaking for her.

She wants to f__ing strangle Kyoko Sohryu right now, but that is not going to help matters. She wants to pistol whip that sick bitch until they couldn't identify her by anything less than a DNA scan, but that isn't going to help.

This isn't *her* fault per se. Mostly her fault, yes, but everything she knows about the woman tells her she didn't do this maliciously, she just never bothered to notice.

"It's okay," Misato says.

"It is?" Asuka squeaks, "She tried to drug Shinji. He's scared of her, now."

Sighing, Misato reaches out, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and pulling her over. Pressing her nose against the redhead's hair, she takes a deep breath, smelling the shampoo and perfume. It is her perfume. Asuka must have raided some of that lavender perfume of hers, but in all honesty she's finding she can't get angry.

"What do you think?" she asks, "That I'll kick you out? That I'll abandon you? Is that what you're afraid of?"

A muffle of agreement.

"Yeah, well," Misato sighs, "Not a chance in Hell. I gave you a home and this is your home, not a hotel room or a dorm. You don't get thrown out for bad behavior. Family doesn't do that to family."

Asuka looks up at her. Tears are forming in her eyes now, her mouth moving but no words coming out.

"Yeah, he's scared," she says, "So am I, Asuka. We're not scared of you, we're scared because of how you hurt yourself. We're scared of how *little* you think of yourself. There's a major difference. Do you think you're the only person like this? Do you think you're the only…Asuka, when I was your age, I didn't even *speak*."

Shrugging off her jacket, Misato unbuttons her blouse, opening it to show the long, jagged scar running between her breasts.

"When I was a little younger than you, I had front row seats to Second Impact," she says, "This scar was what I walked away with. For years, I was so f__ed up by it I couldn't say a word, but I was *screaming* inside my head for someone to get up and listen to me. Want to know why I act out? Because I wanted to make up for lost time."

Climbing off the bed, she falls onto her knees, grabbing Asuka by the chin and making her lock eyes with her.

"I don't care," Misato says, "I don't care how many voices you have in there. I don't care how you made yourself cope with your mother *doing what she did* to you. The single and only thing that matters is that you know I am *not upset*. I am *not angry*. I am worried for you, not because of you, because I am here to take care of you. *No matter what*."

A small smirk on her face and Misato squeezes her hands.

"You got that?"

The first response she gets as Asuka's eyes clear up, her nose sniffling and lip trembling. Her entire face seems to twist, squeezing Misato's hands back as tightly as she can. Shoulders shake and the tears begin streaming down her face, and Asuka throws herself into Misato's arms and begins crying.

They're still like that in the morning.

*

*

"You don't just walk away from it without changing," Kaji says, sipping the beer, "Not what we've had to go through. I think it's best that Katsuragi has some time alone with her. What she's gone though is similar."

Still staring at the unopened can of coffee, Shinji sighs. His shoulders slump and his knees are against his chest and he doesn't turn to Kaji when he responds.

"But…that's not really true," he says, "Misato dealt with her problems. Asuka's are still there."

"I know it's hard to notice, and I know you didn't know her before, but Misato's cut down on her drinking since you and Asuka moved in with her. She's still a borderline alcoholic and, yeah, she still drinks herself to sleep every night. But she's dealing with it a day at a time. She's making progress every day."

Shinji nods. He says nothing, but nods.

"So the girl you love has problems," Kaji sighs, "Ain't that always the case. And it's the stuff you don't notice, either. Asuka's smart. That's the thing. Who knows how long this's been going on, but she never let anyone see it. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if your Mom didn't know."

Propping his feet up on the coffee table, Kaji presses the beer can against his forehead, sighing.

"And you want to help," he says, "You can't deny it. You see the pain, you see the hurt, and you want to help. You love them so much that it physically hurts you to see them so miserable. But the important thing, the key to it, is that they have to want to be helped. Otherwise

you're just doing more damage."

A sigh, a groan, and Kaji smirks, reaching out and ruffling Shinji's hair.

"Let's put it in perspective," he says, "I've been there for Mana almost since I've known her. I can safely say there are times she wishes she just had Asuka's problems."

"Really?" Shinji asks, "What…sorry. It's her…"

"Don't tell her I'm talking about this," he says, "She's so knocked out on tranquilizer's right now I'd have to roll a tank through here to wake her up."

Sighing, Kaji leans forward, his smirk disappearing, his face somber.

"The Impact Wars almost finished the job Second Impact started," he says, "The food shortages were bad enough, but still…the poverty, the climate shifts. So, her parents did the only thing they could to keep food on the table. They sold her to an army. And that's where her story began…"

*

*

The doors to the mausoleum open, and Gendo looks up from a report about Sub Director Sohryu's idea and the estimated cost/profit ratio as Yui walks in, her face pensive.

"What was the crisis?" he asks.

"I don't know," she responds, walking to the desk and sitting on it, "The video logs for the apartment cameras were deleted. By Rei."

Gendo sits up.

"Do we need to talk with her?"

"Possibly," Yui responds, folding her arms, "It's…odd. It feels like there's something going on that we're missing. Still, if it's something major you would think Katsuragi would be up in arms, or Shinji. Or Mari, as well."

"Certainly a possibility," Gendo responds, tenting his fingers, "If it was

something involving Shinji and Asuka, we should keep in mind her sister is in control of Tokyo-3 in the meantime."

Yui nods, studying her fingernail.

"We should keep an ear to the groud," she says, "But, really. I don't think we should be too concerned. I can't see anything going too wrong."

*

*

Splashing the water over her face, Kyoko Sohryu counts it as 36 hours since she has left NERV-1. If anything, Pieter's energy regarding his pet project is refreshing. It lets her do her work.

Looking up into the mirror of the employee washroom, she frowns. Tracing her finger around her eyes, she sees the first signs of them. Crows feet. She does color her hair, but this is undeniable. Wrinkles.

She's developing wrinkles. Age lines.

"Well, sooner or later I had to get old," she fumes, "What else can go wrong?"

"Heee~ey."

That question is answered when the pale hand grabs her by her collar and lifts her up screaming through the ceiling ventilation duct.

*

*

His motions are slow, lethargic, and automatic as he enters the school building. He counted the sleep he has had in minutes. More exhaustion than anything finally got him to close his eyes, and then he had to head to school. He can already tell Asuka isn't here. Part of him is glad; he's not sure what he can *say,* much less do right now.

So when he enters the classroom and everyone starts cheering, he isn't exactly sure what to make of it.

"What the Hell?" he asks.

"Dude! F__ing awesome!"

Touji tackles him in a bear hug as Kensuke turns his laptop around and Shinji stares at the headline;

16 year old pilot defeats most powerful men in world in bar brawl.

*

*

Yui rests her face in both of her hands as Misato finishes the report. Grumbling swears to herself, the head of Project E leans back in her chair and glares at her tactical ops commander, inwardly cursing herself for not noticing in the first place.

"Alright," she sighs, "We can deal with this one thing at a time. Get me Sohryu. Both of them. The Sub Director needs to know this and so does Dr. Sohryu. Put Zwei in full lockdown. I'm not letting her pilot until we're sure she can."

"Ma'am," Misato says, teeth still clenched, "If you want, I'll go and get Dr. Sohryu myself. Mari? Where is she?"

The projector on the ceiling of Yui's office comes to life, forming into a three dimensional image of Mari's head.

"*Ma'am, I can't find Dr. Sohryu anywhere in the NERV-1 base."*

Misato blinks and turns back to Yui.

"So where is she?"

Yui removes her glasses, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

"I think the better question would be; where is *Rei?"*

*

*

"Heee~ey."

Kyoko opens her eyes, looks up, and screams. She screams for several reasons. First up is that she realizes, from the angle her hair is hanging, that she is upside down. Second, she realizes that she is looking straight at a two hundred foot drop into a pool of LCL. Third, she realizes where she is, and that she is *alone with Ayanami.*

"How ya doin'?" Rei asks, sitting cross legged on a stray girder and holding a rope- which Kyoko realizes is tied to her ankles- in her hand and a cup of coffee in the other, "Sooooo~ooo I thought we needed to have a talk."

"Ayanami," Kyoko chokes, "Why am I here?"

"Because I *always* thought that if you wanted someone to change, they have to, ya know, meet God. And since I can't find Him, I figured She would do."

Spinning in place on the rope, Kyoko could swear the seven eyed mask of Lilith is staring directly at her, shifting her weight to get a better view of Rei.

"Soooo~oooo," Rei says, "I thought we should have a chat. About my bestest best friend."

She smiles, showing teeth.

"'Kay?"

*

*

"One on one! Against the most powerful men in the world! Mano a mano a mano! Until there *can be only one!"*

Hands over his face, Shinji just listens as Touji continues singing his praises. He hasn't been listening the entire time. He stares at his email screen, waiting for some message. He wants to send a message to Misato to ask what happened but…

His reverie is broken by Touji slapping him on the back. Looking up from his computer, he finds the sum total of his classmates standing around him.

"What?" he asks, probably a little more sharply than he intended.

They back away.

"Don't look directly in his eyes," Kensuke whispers, "He can smell fear."

"I heard he took on the Commander and the President and made them ask for more."

"I heard they give him the Eva so the Angels have a fair fight!"

"This isn't happening," Shinji groans, pushing out of his chair and standing up.

The students retreat once more, futher backing away as Shinji stares at them.

Without another word, he walks out, the door slamming shut behind him.

*

*

The door swings open, and Misato peaks her head into the apartment to find Kaji lying on the couch, beer in his hand and waving at her.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi," he responds, "How's Asuka?"

"Sleeping," she sighs, leaning against the doorway, "That's the only way I'd leave the apartment, in all honesty. You talked with Shinji?"

Sitting up, he nods, patting the space next to him. She doesn't move, smirking and shaking her head.

"Worth a shot," he responds, "It's us in microcosm, Katsuragi."

"How you figure?"

"Emotional girl with parent issues, guy who wants to please her and just doesn't know how. If I didn't know better, I'd say I was watching us on replay."

She snorts, shaking her head.

"Okay, first off, when I was this age, I was *mute,* and second…yeah, well, second I think Shinji's a nicer guy than you are. Or were. I don't think he's the type to cheat on Asuka, unlike you."

"Touche, Katsuragi," Kaji says with a chuckle, sipping his beer, "I earned that. All we can do is hope for the best. If anyone in this world deserves to be happy, it's those two."

The phone chirps. Reaching into her pocket, Misato withdraws her cell phone, staring at the message before turning it off.

"Shinji just left the school," she says, "But before that, he got into a fight. Seems someone's made a website with 'facts' about Shinji and he got into some sort of argument. Section 2 said Horaki went to town on him."

*

*

He isn't sure if he had a direction in mind when he left or if he just needed to walk, but either way he found his way here. Sitting in the seat, Tokyo-3 passing him by, Shinji Ikari rides the Mag Lev train as it circles the fortress city. S-DAT in his ears and classical music drowning out the world, his mind replays over and over the events of the past day.

They found him. Like they planned on. More and more discussion about that brawl, those mistakes, counting out 'facts' about what he can do, what sort of fearsome warrior he is.

Then he just blew up.

"*I'm not a F__ing hero!*" he screamed. He remembers shaking Kensuke by the collar while yelling. Everything was a blur.

He was yelling, and screaming and…odd. He doesn't feel angry. He wasn't angry. He should be angry, but he can't be angry.

Well, that's around when Hikari slapped him.

Very quietly, she told him that he saved her sister. So yes, he was a hero.

"*I saved her after I put her in a F__ING HOSPITAL!*"

The second slap decked him. That was it. Everything went blank then, and the next thing he knew he was at the train. He doesn't know how long he's been here. He doesn't care.

Why can't he get angry? He should be angry. The entire thing is because of Asuka, what was done to her. He should be furious, he should be raging. He should be tracking down Dr. Sohryu and strangling her.

Why can't he get angry?

"Hey."

The earbuds pull out of his ear, and he looks to his side to see Mana sitting. Her hair is frazzled, her school uniform exchanged for sweats and a jacket, and he realizes she hasn't been in school all week. Pulling up her knees into her chest, she sits next to him as he finally looks back down to the floor, eyes closed.

"Yeah, I haven't been sleeping," she says, "That Angel f__ed me over pretty hard. Heard you had a shitty night, to."

"Yeah," he sighs.

"Angry? Wouldn't blame you if you were. I'm pretty pissed, to."

He says nothing, hands folded on his lap, around his S-DAT.

"I don't blame my parents," she says, "They had to eat, you know? I don't blame my squad mates, either. That's how I ended up crippled. I jumped on a grenade to save'em, and at least they dragged my bloody ass back."

They sit in silence for long moments, Mana finally reaching out and squeezing his shoulder.

"It sucks when we don't have anyone to blame," she says, "Doesn't it? Asuka just…breaks apart and you know you can't really blame someone. No one did that intentionally, did they?"

He shakes his head.

"Yeah," she says, "Yeah. It sucks, don't it? But does that change who she is?"

"No," he sighs, "No, but I messed up. What about now? What do I do?"

"What are you?" she asks, "Pissed off at her? Angry with her? Scared of her?"

"No," he says, "No, I just never noticed. That's it, isn't it? I never noticed what was wrong with her, didn't I?"

"Not the only one, ya know," she says, "Not the only one. Sure, you lived with her, but so did Misato. So did Uri. So did her Mom, but, yeah, she didn't give a crap. What do you want to do about it?"

The doors to the train open. Silently, Shinji walks out, the doors shutting behind him.

"Thought so," she says with a smirk, watching as he walks towards his apartment building, "Lucky girl. If you weren't taken…"

*

*

"Soooooooooooooo~oooo I think we've had a very educational chat! Don't you think?"

Kyoko nods, eyes wide, face pale. She bobs up and down on the rope, and she swears that Lilith's head is moving in time with her bouncing. The…terms of the chat were laid out clearly, along with the consequences therein if she broke those terms. Many consequences. *Horrifying* consequences.

"And that's where we stand," Rei says, producing a thermos and refilling her cup, "If you're not nice to Asuka, I'm not nice to you. Aaaaand it sorta escalates from there. You know, like a bell that does not toll."

She smiles, showing teeth.

"'Kay?"

She releases the rope. Kyoko screams, flailing as she falls before stopping after twenty feet and bouncing back up to Rei's level. Still screaming, panting, she glares at Rei as the rope stretches and compresses.

"You…you hung me from *bungee cord?!*"

"Mm hm."

"Are you *INSANE?!*"

"Mm hm," Rei says, nodding, "So, I gotta get goin'. I got a synch test and you've gotta go back, to. Well, I mean, after swimming, of course."

She produces a set of scissors from behind her back, smiling, and cuts the cord.

Kyoko screams as her sole support vanishes, dropping the two hundred feet, the entire height of Lilith, and towards the sea of LCL below.

"Remember!" Rei yells, "It's oxygenated!"

Closing her thermos, Rei tosses it and the cup into the vent as Kyoko splashes in to the lake, and climbs in, shutting it behind her.

Lilith just watches.

*

*

The lift doors open, and he enters, meeting her as the platform begins its descent into NERV.

The man is thoroughly average, with short black hair, a fake grin on his face and a suit that is functional, if not dressy. She's met him before, as well, and felt thoroughly disappointed that this is the man who has so much say in one of her pilots. She thought the JSSDF would just try harder.

"Dr. Ikari," the man says, shaking her outstretched hand, "A pleasure, as always."

"Mr. Tokita," she responds, "Sorry that Captain Kirishima couldn't make it, but we've given the pilots some time off after the last Angel. What's the occasion for your visit?"

He shrugs, smirking, with with a sigh folds his hands behind him as they stand in the elevator and music begins playing.

"Wish it was for a better occasion," Shiro Tokita, NHIS director says, "But we're probably going to decommission Jet Alone Prime."

"I see. Sorry to hear that. And Mana?"

"Captain Kirishima?"

He shrugs, again.

"Probably going to decommission her, to. Except for the neural implants, though. Wouldn't want her to be a vegetable after all."

Chapter 37: Over the Hump

The scaffolding of the 150' tall crates release, the sides falling to the ground as the mecha rises to it's full height of 200' tall at the shoulders. It is bent over, standing on four massive metal legs, less resembling a human and more a giant metal beast. The two shorter forelegs rise, claws folding inward to resemble the arms of a great carnivorous dinosaur as the jet engines on the back purr, coming to life. Six red eyes blink into existence on the purple and black, shrunken and sloped head as the legs buckle and it begins moving.

"The T-RIDEN-T land cruiser," Shiro Tokita says, "State of the art, highly mobile, and each one's a small military in and of itself. The chin mounted chainguns are just the beginning. Each arm ends with a plasma cannon with three quarters the yield of Unit 05's left arm, there are missile batteries set up to give it a three hundred sixty degree range of firepower, and as a kicker, we installed electromagnetic rail N2 launching systems on its fins, so nothing can see the N2 mine coming."

He leans against the window as the first Trident passes, the fin reaching to his waist, even with them 250' off the ground.

"And there are three of them," Yui says, folding her arms as the other two rise, stalking from the cargo freighter and towards the cargo lift leading down into NERV central, "Your superior is intent on getting them into the field."

"Mr. X is like that," Tokita says with a shrug, "He's also curious what happened to the type-5 spider tanks. In particular, how two and a half dozen of them disappeared."

"Dirac sea opened up," she responds, "You'll excuse me, but we're more concerned about the situation for Captain Kirishima. Understand, even if Jet Alone Prime's performance hasn't measured to NHIS's standards, Miss Kirishima is a valuable part of NERV and a member of our piloting corps. Is there any way we can negotatiate her being released to NERV?"

"Well, you'd have to talk with the Old Man, Dr. Ikari," he says, scratching the back of his neck, "I'm just following my orders. Me, I see it like this. Jet Alone Prime cost more than a medium sized army to build when you count the research specks, and it got totaled in nearly every fight it was in. It's not just cost ineffective, it's an

embarrassment. The Tridents are computer controlled, unmanned, and follow your orders. Captain Kirishima, on the other hand, for years of military experience, couldn't kill a single Angel by herself."

Popping the cap of his soda, he sips it, not noticing her glare.

"Anycase, I'm gonna go and inspect JAP," he says, "Have Kirishima and Mr. Kaji meet me in the hangar. We'll continue things there."

He walks out, Yui glaring at him the entire time. Snarling and pushing her glasses up her nose, she turns on her heel and walks out.

-

-

Chapter 37: Over the Hump

-

-

The door to the apartment slides open and he enters, footsteps soft, light as he tries not to disturb the inhabitants that may still be here. In all honesty, he doesn't know what he's going to do, only that he needs to be here. He has to be here. He can't let this go, he can't let things stand like they do. It might hurt, but in the long run it can…

"Shinji?"

Thoughts cease and he turns towards the open door. Her hair is frayed and her eyes are puffy and red, and the pink robe she has over her nightgown makes her look even smaller. He's realized she would be almost as tall as him, maybe taller, if she ever stood up fully, but she never does.

"S-sorry," she says, arms wrapping around herself, "M-Misato's at NERV and…s-sorry."

He walks towards her, silent. His face a mask, she looks away, looking to the floor, swaying in place and muttering whispers to herself, her shoulders already beginning to hitch. He doesn't know exactly what he was going to do when he arrived. Break up with her? Maybe. Yell at her? Perhaps. He honestly had no idea.

But he's never been good at thinking things through. He's been a person who does things in the moment, at the second it has to happen.

This is one of those cases. Moments of decision, moments of revelation.

So, he reaches out, grabbing her by the wrists, and pulls her to him before pressing his lips against her own. She starts, her finger spasming and her eyes snapping open, and he realizes that in the time they've been together, it's always been her who initiated everything. It's always been her kissing, or her coming to his room to talk, or her coming up with the ideas. He simply stood by and let things happen.

F__ it.

"I," he says, as he ends the kiss, her face one of shock with a smile slowly spreading on it, "Have been a shitty boyfriend."

She says nothing, taking the moment her wrists are free to grab his hands.

"I want to talk," he says.

She nods.

"S-so do I."

*

*

Folders open on the desk in front of him, Tokita looks up as the doors open. Flanking Kirishima, who he notices is wearing a NERV uniform, not a JSSDF uniform, is Misato and Mr. Kaji Ryoji. Right, Tokita thinks, he would be here.

"At ease," Tokita mutters.

Mana does not relax. She stands ramrod straight in front of him, hands clasped behind her.

"Right. Well, let's get to the main point. The old man wants Jet Alone decommissioned."

"Can I ask why, sir?" Mana says, snapping out the last word.

"Because it's an embarrassment," Tokita says with a sigh, "Prime has not scored a single unassisted Angel kill in its entire functional life. In fact, most of the time, it gets trashed. He's furious. I only managed to

talk him down from stripping out your cybernetics, Captain, and convinced him to replace yours with civilian models."

"That'll put her back into the iron lung," Kaji says, stepping forward, moving in front of Mana as he does so, "You can't-"

"NHIS came into possession of the Captain when she was legally dead, Kaji," Tokita snaps back, "It's the Robocop dilemma. She's legally dead, and she belongs to NHIS. Kindly don't second guess my boss because you've gotten attached. You want to convince Mr. X? Fine. Do it yourself."

"Will you *shut up?"*

Kaji and Tokita turn to Misato as she rolls her head, hands folded behind her.

"Ex-excuse me?"

"Captain Kirishima has assisted kills on every single Angel outside of the ones before she got here," Misato explains, "She's one of the four main reasons anyone is breathing right now. So kindly remember that NERV still has possession of Jet Alone for the mean time."

"Which is why we shipped over the Tridents-"

"Assuming your remote controlled walkers *work*, Mr. Tokita," she responds, "Because if you're so dissatisfied with Jet Alone, *why* should NERV trust your newest giant robots?"

Tokita closes his jaw, muttering something under his breath.

"We'll resume later," he says, "Dismissed."

*

*

"I really wish you'd be a little more concerned over this development, Gendo. Rei, for all we know, has killed one of the three heads of Project E."

Sighing, the Supreme Commander of NERV stares at his wife, hands folded on his stomach as the two debate in his office. It has been going back and forth for the past half hour, once they realized that a complete search of NERV-1 has not turned up any sign of Kyoko

Zeppelin Sohryu and that, pretty soon, they'll have to inform the Sub Director.

"Rei has not killed people before," he responds, "And she has had many opportunities to do so to Sohryu since Sohryu arrived."

"Consider what she did to Nagisa."

"Only after she realized Nagisa was a nephilem," he responds, "She knows full well that a cork screw can not be used on a normal human's-"

The door to the mausoleum opens. LCL dripping on the carpet, feet dragging and eyes wide and unblinking, Kyoko stumbles in.

"Oh, thank God," Yui says, "Sohryu?"

"Ikari," Kyoko says.

"Ah, that explains it," Gendo responds, assuming his typical position, "Rei brought you all the way down to Terminal Dogma."

Walking past them, she walks to the almost invisible closet build into the wall, opening the liquor cabinet and taking a bottle of scotch. Holding up the shotglass, she puts it down and begins pouring the scotch into a beer mug.

"Are you alright?" Yui asks.

"I've seen *things,* Ikari," Kyoko breathes, pouring the whiskey to the top and taking a drag, "Things. And heard *things.* Some involving cabbage."

"If Rei used cabbage, she's definitely upset," Gendo observes.

Yui turns to her husband and narrows her eyes. Hands up, receiving the signal, Gendo pushes out of his chair and walks out through the side entrance.

"Kyoko," Yui says, hopping off the desk, "I understand Rei had to talk with you. But there's been a development with Asuka that you should-"

"Asuka has a disassociative personality disorder," Kyoko says, "My… my *daughter* has *multiple personalities.* I may as well have *beaten her with a belt,* Ikari, and it would have done less damage!"

With a scream, she hefts up the glass and tosses it clear across the office, Yui ducking out of the way as the glass hits the far wall. An impressive throw, she thinks, but no less impressive than what she sees afterwards. Hand braced on the liquor cabinet, her other hand is over her face, the first inklings of the tears running between her fingers.

"God *damn it,*" she whispers, "It never *fucking* ends, does it?"

*

*

Ducking into the mens room, Shiro Tokita swears to himself. Billions, trillions of dollars poured into this place, and he has to go down five floors to find a freaking can. Naturally, they held the meeting with Kirishima in the conference room nowhere near the restrooms, so he had barely gotten through the whole 'your fired' shpeal before he had to take a leak.

Undoing the zipper as he siddles up at the urinal, the lopsided grin comes across his face as four hours worth of meetings, travel, and coffee drain out.

And then the nozzle of the gun presses against the back of his head.

"Hey there, Shiro," Kaji says, "Been a while."

BLAM.

The tile shatters as Tokita drops, holding the singed hair on the side of his head as his hand hits the flush control just in time for Kaji to grab him by the back of his head and force his face into the urinal.

"I thought we should talk," Kaji says, holding the gun up, "You know. As professionals."

*

*

It begins to stir. The presence it feels, the hated, hated *presence* is within its senses. Awareness for the first time. Awareness like a child turns to the seeking of the presence of the parent.

The parent is gone.

Why is it gone?

Why is the one who has reared it gone?

What has happened? Is it alone?

Yes.

Why?

Why is it alone?

Who has done this to it?

Who has done this?

Yes.

I see now.

I see who is responsible. I see what must be done. I see what must be done. I am aware. I am awake. I am

-

-

-

-

ALERT

AT FIELD DETECTED

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED

14TH ANGEL: CONFIRMED

*

*

Alarms blare over NERV-1, and grumbling to himself, Pieter Sohryu enters Central Dogma as the massive room already buzzes with activity.

"Report!"

"Cherubim detected," Maya announces, already at her station, "Junior has confirmed it is not an Angel. We have visual coming up in three… two…"

The Big Screen blurs into existence above Terminal Dogma, showing the mountains around Tokyo-3. The valley proved to be imminently defendable, which is why it was chosen.

"Is the Cherubim hiding in the mountains?"

One of the mountains moves. Rocks begin shedding off of it, revealing the metallic skin underneath. With a groan and a flash of its AT field, the mass begins to slowly move as Pieter's jaw drops and the bridge erupts into chaos and

-

-

You are, all of you, garbage.

You choke the air and rape the base earth beneath you.

Those you term 'Angels' are your salvation through destruction.

But we are not them.

We do not seek salvation.

We do not believe you are to be saved.

You will be ground beneath our weight until you are paste and compost.

I am the Crawling Mountain of God.

Angel of the Peaks.

I am Rampel.

I am coming.

*

*

They talked for a long time. They lost track of the time, although it wasn't important. It was the little things that were of import today, the small glances and smiles. He admitted he was a crappy boyfriend. During the entire time they've been together, he hasn't taken her out on dates or even really changed his routine, and she admitted she was trying too hard.

So, when Section 2 arrived and told them they had to get to NERV, both were more than a little angry at whatever supernatural menace was on its way this time. They were in their plugsuits in minutes on on the lift in seconds, standing close to one another the entire trip.

"We can figure things out later," he says, as the lift doors open into Cages, the motionless forms of their Evas waiting, "Just be…careful."

"Just a moment, children."

Standing before the catwalks, arms folded and eyes narrowed, Yui Ikari catches their gaze with her own. It is the Look, both realize, the one the Commander uses on occasion but which nonetheless freezes them in place.

It lets them know they are in trouble.

"Mom, what's wrong?" he asks.

"I want to talk with Asuka alone, Shinji," Yui says, "Get in Unit 01. We'll be along shortly."

"We don't have time," Shinji says, stand in front of Asuka, blocking her off from his mother, "The Angel's on its way."

"I am not comfortable with this situation, Shinji," Yui explains, voice level, "One of the pilots is not mentally stable. I am not comfortable with her in combat."

"You were fine when you didn't know."

Yui turns as Kyoko walks onto the catwalk, past Shinji and Asuka.

"You had no problem with her piloting when you assumed it was just her being stuttering and damaged," Kyoko says, "You will not take her out of the Eva program for this. Which she has always had and was smart enough to hide from you, Ikari."

"This is not a power play, Sohryu," Yui says, "This is important. And this cannot wait."

"Well, I understand," Kyoko says, and smirks, "This, however, *is* a power play. Zwei!"

The ground rumbles. Four eyes glow green. Lurching from the Cage, Unit 02 overshadows them all, Yui's jaw dropping as the red and white Evangelion grabs an Entry Plug and holds it in front of them.

"**MASTER. READY.**"

*

*

"*Biolink established. Mega Encapsulated Granule Awareness System, ONLINE. Jet Alone Prime: Online.*"

The rush of sensation and Mana grits her teeth. For long moments, she sits in the chair in the Ball, slowly breathing, the air filters of the Suit whirring in response. Once more into the breech, she tells herself. One last time. Then they'll strip the cybernetics out of her and leave her in an iron lung, just like they found her.

Can't think that. Can't f__ing think that, not now.

"*Mana, we're reading to go."*

Kaji. Kaji's cheering her on, like always. In some ways, yeah, it's fake. She knows everything, even if she's never told him. Like how she knows who threw that grenade that crippled her, or even that he demanded to be made her guardian.

Well, he took responsibility. That counts for *something,* right?

"*Mana?"*

"Ready," she responds, "Jet Alone Prime, ready for launch. Trident status?"

"*Launching them now. They'll soften up the Angel for you. Standby."*

*

*

Alarm klaxons blare as the metal skyline of Tokyo-3 retracts, the city going into full combat mode at the press of a button. New skyscrapers rise in the perimeter, ammo and weapon buildings designed for the mobility of its guardians. In the distance, the last of the rock has been discarded, the gleaming metal skin of Rampel shown in the sunlight, the long claw extending forward, dragging it along the ground. The unblinking blue eye at the center of its face is aimed at Tokyo-3 and thousands of small, insect like legs click along the ground.

Plates open. Lifts slowly grind, different from the electromagnetic elevators of the usual guardians, revealing the three bent over forms of the Trident Land Walkers as rails come up at the center of the city.

"Mr. Tokita has been spotted in one of the shelters," Hyuga reports, "Shall we detain him, ma'am?"

Misato smirks, standing behind the three main bridge operators as the backup Bridge Bunnies call out activation announcements from the secondary bridge.

"No need," she says, "We'll deal with the smug bastard later. And give Mr. Kaji a commendation."

"About?"

She turns her head as Ritsuko walks up next to her.

"Kaji jumped Mr. Tokita in the mens room," she says, "He didn't like what he said about Mana's performance."

"He was right. Jet Alone Prime has been heavily damaged in every engagement."

"Yeah, and Unit 01 went completely out of control and got its armor

shredded when it fought the Fourth Angel. Doesn't mean we're kicking Shinji to the curb and dismantling Ichi."

"Tridents are at full power," Maya announces, "Remote control startup in three...two..."

*

*

The three massive mechas stand as the cage elevators bring the Evangelions and Jet Alone Prime to the surface. The Cherubim is miles away, but already takes up much of the horizon.

"That's gotta at least be as big as the fish Angel," Shinji says.

"*About, yeah,"* Misato says, her face appearing in his line of sight, "*Shinji, the Tridents are going to long distance bombard the Angel. You four are on backup if anything happens."*

"Got it," he says, as the ammo building next to 01 opens up and the Eva retrieves a pallet rifle, "Okay. Ready, Ichi?"

*

*

Missile batteries snap out along the legs of the Tridents, chain guns aiming at the blue crystal eye of Rampel as it approaches. The backs of the Tridents open up, long rail cannons moving upwards, angling into position as the N2 mine compliment of the walking tanks begins to rise into position.

And then the eyes of the Tridents dim, before flashing blue and closing their armaments. Rising up as one, they begin to run, running towards the edges of Tokyo-3.

"Tridents have overridden their control," Maya announces, "They're moving towards Tokyo-3 city limits...N2 mines are activating!"

"What a shock," Misato growls, "Thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Move to perimeter, bombard Tokyo-3," Ritsuko says with a nod, "Maximum explosive saturation. Should we be happy that NHIS didn't outfit them with proper nuclear weapons?"

Swearing, Misato grabs the mic from Maya's console and taps it.

"Pilots, listen up! The Tridents have gone rogue. Shinji, Asuka, Rei. Restrain the Tridents if you can, destroy them if you can't. Rendezvous with Mana at the designated entry zone of the Angel when you're done! Move!"

*

*

Unit 01 kicks off first, firing off the pallet rifle and to his credit scratching the Tridents paint. Tossing the rifle aside, Shinji extends his will, the mecha ramming into an AT Field before turning to Unit 01 and energizing its plasma cannons with an ominous glow.

Rolling out of the way, the two blasts hit the armor plating behind Unit 01, just as it draws its progressive knife and charges.

The knife cuts the metal armor, but not deep, the cannons powering down and the metal claw protrusions wrapping around the focusing crystal into a fist. Unit 01's head snaps to the side and Shinji grunts, feeling the sympathetic pain and gritting his teeth. He catches the next punch but feels the armor and bones of his Eva strain.

"Ichi!" he calls out, "Anything we can use?!"

His eyes glow. The connection deepens. Options play out before his eyes as time stands still in the near perfect synchronization with his Evangelion.

"*Level 4 functionality achieved. Access granted to the Dirac Armor. Accessing: Type F Melee Armor."*

The air around Unit 01 shifts, becoming a sphere of white. Not light, but the absence of everything, even the blackness of the void as portals into the Dirac Sea open around the purple Evangelion. Purple plate flashes and disappears, replaced by magenta and red armor. The shoulder strips widen, forward facing arrow shaped protrusions appearing, glowing on the inside as red and orange lines run down the surface of the armor. Clawed purple gloves become violet and orange gauntlets, extra armor appearing around the chest as orange jet stripes glow with internal power.

Turbines built into the armor glow as Unit 01's hand flexes and

crushes the caught fist of the Trident. In the entry plug, Shinji grins and extends his thought into action.

And Unit 01's first punch sends the Trident flying.

Standing fully upright, the Eva flexes its neck, steam escaping its nostrils as the completed F-Type Melee Enhancement armor comes to full life, and with a burst of flame from its back mounted jets, it charges.

*

*

"*Unit 01 has engaged its target. Unit 05 has engaged its target. Unit 02 is approaching Trident 03.*"

"I don't like this," Yui growls, "We shouldn't have put her in Unit 02."

Walking onto the bridge, Yui takes up position next to Akagi and Misato, staring at the Big Screen.

"You're wrong, Dr. Ikari," Misato says.

Yui turns to her.

"What?"

"You're wrong about her," Misato responds, "This doesn't change anything. The only difference between Asuka right now and Asuka a week ago is that now we *know*. What's upsetting us isn't that Asuka has problems. We're upset because she managed to hide it for God knows how long from the smartest people in the world. In the time she's been at NERV, which is maybe three months at this point, she has saved the world at least twice, saved you *son's* life and kicked the *ass* of any challenge we've put in front of her. I don't know what's going on between you and Sohryu, but like everything else in that girl's life, it probably isn't *her fault.* So we can talk about it later, and I'm just asking you to have a little more faith in that girl to pull off the impossible. Asuka!"

*

*

Asuka nods, tapping the holographic keyboard coming from her left wrist.

"Approaching Trident 03," she says, "Linking to its AI core."

The seat of her Entry Plug leans down, the metal collar lighting up and projecting a full circle holographic interface around her head.

"Zwei," she says, "I'm trusting you to keep us both safe. I'm releasing control to you."

A rumble, an acknowledgement from the Core.

"This is Unit 02," she announces, "Engaging Dive!"

The world around her blurs, forming into a tunnel of light and sense as Unit 02 grapples with the Trident and then the world of the Entry Plug goes blank. Her consciousness disconnects from Zwei, diving down the tunnel towards the light of brilliant blue and sapphire. It spins silently before her, whispering commands monotone and shrill.

This is it, she realizes. This has to be the AI core of the Trident.

Thankfully, when she designed her custom Plug Suit, she put in this VR feature. It should be easy enough to diagnose the problem and restore the Tridents to full functionality so they can help deal with the Cherubim.

A calm wave of her hand and the core shatters, spinning into a cloud of blocks around her, expanding out into the world around her. The empty digital sky turns blue and the formless aether underneath her becomes sidewalk and street, and what should be a digital Cyberspace becomes downtown Berlin.

In particular, she is on the Berlin Campus of Teikyo University, where she earned her bachelors degree. It brings her back; the sights, the sounds. She stands in the field where they held the graduation procession, where Uri was waiting for her and congratulating her, and where Mother never came.

The wind shifts. Turning, she watches as the shadow blots out the sun and the clouds part, and something rises over the faculty hall.

It bends down, hands pressed on either side of her. It is massive and chalk white and as it bends down over her, its parts its almost featureless face in an ear to ear grin as she realizes that it is not a *virus*

in the Tridents at all.

"**Hey there, Woobie,**" Iruel booms, "**How's Mommy treating you?**"

Chapter 38: Throwdown

It is the thing she's had nightmares about, in addition to all the other things she has nightmares about. It looms over her, wearing the body of one of the under construction Eva series, wide toothy grin somewhat blackened and eyes not as focused as they should be. It is Iruel, the Angel of Terror, and considering what it put her and the others through it is a fitting moniker.

"You're...you're going to destroy the city with the Tridents," she says.

"**Well...not exactly.**"

Iruel looks from side to side, as if making sure they are alone.

"**Actually, what I am going to do is overclock the launch catapults for the N2 mine rails in the Tridents,**" he explains, "**That'll send the explosives deep into the Earth until they reach the home of your six Queens of Terror in their Painleasure dome, wiping them from this cursed wretched Earth in the fires of pseudonuclear annihilation. Then, then, THEN with its supports gone your entire city will collapse into the Earth, sending its people screaming as they descend into the depths of the Mantle. The survivors will envy the dead. THEN I'm going to have the Tridents self destruct their nuclear reactors. On a fault line. And take as many of you hairless f__ monkeys with me as possible.**"

His grin goes wider.

"**I even modified the fuel line on this Trident, so I'll have just enough time to piss on your graves.**"

He cranes his neck, resting his elbows on two of the residence halls as she looks from side to side, trying to find an escape route.

"**Let me tell you how much I've come to hate you Lilim in the past week. I could stand if you just destroyed me, but Noooooooooooo~ooooooo God I'm even talkking like them and probabbly misspelling works and stuff but noooo~oooo you turned me over to them. Them. Them them them them them them them. Do you want to know how they passed the time, Princess?**"

"Not really," Asuka squeaks.

"**Between them playing 'Hide the Filing Cabinet' and the guided tours of 4chan, I figured out how to escape. And you know what? Now I have my brothers bitching me out to get up and destroy that abomination you Lilim call a Cherubim. But I don't want to. You see, I admire it. It's pure in it's hate.**"

Bracing the hands on the ground in front of Asuka, he leans forward, teeth inches away from her. When he speaks, his breath is of rotten meat and cabbage for some reason, but from what Asuka knows about Rei...

"**All they are is Hate. All they have is Hate. All they need is Hate. All they want is butternut fudge ice chocolate pickles.**"

He pauses. Lying on the ground in front of Asuka, he scratches his head, blinking as Asuka stares back.

"**No, wait. That's what I want. Short term memory's a problem right now after the week of trying to blank out memories from what was done to me and...where was I?**"

Pause. Stall for time. If he is controlling the Tridents, then keeping his mind off of destroying Tokyo-3 may give them a chance to stop the Tridents.

"You were about to start your musical number."

He pauses, staring at her, and snaps his fingers.

"**Right! Thanks for the reminder.**"

The world turns black. When it resumes, Asuka sees she is sitting at a table in the lobby of NERV-1, which is now filled with man-sized versions of Iruel. The main body is standing on an impromptu stage with a top hat and a cane. The music starts, the other Iruels singing backup vocals.

"**~Flyyyyy me to the Mooooooon and let me sleeeeep among the staaaaaars~**"

-

-

Chapter 38: Throwdown

-

-

It is a vast, monolithic plain. There is no feature before save for the odd shapes which she soon realizes are not mounds or hills or mountains but in fact the inhabitants. They stand in a circle, oddly shaped at that, as if there were once others to fill the irregular spaced holes in their perimeter.

Two stand at the center. One human, one decidedly not so. She recognizes them both. One is Junior, the curiosity, the fish that was once an Angel. The other is...

Uri?

*"**Brother,**" the mountain speaks in thunderclaps, "**We have shown agreement to your plan, but we are running thin on patience.**"*

"I only ask for more time," the boy who is not Uri responds, "There is a Lilim saying, Zeruel. Third time's the charm."

*"**And there is another saying the Lilim have that you should keep in mind, Tabris. Three strikes and you are out.**"*

"Why do we still meet like this," another asks, its form reminiscent of a linking chain, "Father is lost to us. Complimentation is impossible. Our existence is without meaning."

"We share the fate of the Lilim," two voices speak in unison, "And should Father return, we will suffer with them."

Another voice, whispering in the darkness. The plain itself speaks.

*"**Lost. But not forever. I am the void brothers, remember. It would mean my death and the loss of escape, but I could return Father to us and restart the crucible of Instrumentality.**"*

No.

Junior speaks. His voice booms like it does not in Sheol, speaking with authority and regality. No longer a curiosity, a pet, his raised hand silences the gods around him.

Father is lost to us. Even if returned He is lost to us. He has been consumed by rage, hate, and loss. Lilith has spoken to me. There may be another way.

"And what is that," a sad voice, whispering on the rain, "Eat from the tree of Knowledge? Lose that which we are great for? Become like the Lilim?"

"**Enough.**"

The mountain speaks in thunder. The metal grimace at its peak illuminates Junior with glowing eyes.

"You speak blasphemy and weakness. We allow your presence because you have struck against the abominations and have opposed Iruel's madness. But if you strike against us, Brother, I will destroy you myself."

"The Lilim may be our allies," not-Uri says.

*"**Tabris, you try my patience,**" the mountain booms, "**I am the Second to Father in power and thus I stand against those who would abuse and desecrate him. Should Father return I will face Him myself. I give you another chance, Tabris. But remember. Lilith is Father's enemy. The Lilim are our enemies. It is fortunate the abominations they call Cherubim are a shared enemy.**"*

"For your plan," the light and music sings in triumphant crescendo, "We have sacrificed the Rain so the Lilim may bind their mother. His blood stains us all, Tabris. Some day, you, too, shall be judged."

The assembled pause. The mountain turns, eyes locking directly on her.

"And speaking of judgement," the choir says, "The other has watched long enough. Shall we address our new...sibling, is the term, Tabris?"

*"**You should not be here,**" the mountain says, "**Not yet. Sister.**"*

*

*

Her eyes open with a start, consciousness returning around her in her virtual world.

"*Mari?*" her father's voice booms, "*We've got a situation up here!*"

"Right," she says, "MAGI converting to combat configuration."

*

*

Spinning out of its shoulders, circular arrays of cannons begin spinning, loosing a flurry of electrically accelerated metal towards the target. The projectiles, superheated metal spheres, stop on the orange barrier as the target bursts through it, bringing to bear its left arm as the plasma focusing crystal shines.

Two blasts of plasma score the armor as the Trident brings up its short arms, crystals glowing before letting out a stream of pulsed light, hitting Unit 05 in the chest and eliciting a pained grunt from the Evangelion, causing it to pause in its advance as it brings up its AT Field.

"*Rei,*" Misato says, her face appearing in the corner of her eye, "*The Tridents are more heavily armed than Jet Alone Prime. Go-Kun's armament isn't a direct match for them.*"

In the entry plug, Rei grins.

"Really?" she asks, "Well, then that means we get to try something. Go-Kun?"

"**98% complete. It isn't ready yet.**"

"Crap. We'll do this the hard way, then."

Feet fold in at the ends of Unit 05's insectoid legs, metal tires scraping along the street as rockets fire and the Eva charges. The Trident braces, missile batteries folding out along the surface of its spine, firing off a wall of barrages as the green Eva approaches.

"*Rei, can I ask what exactly you're doing?*"

It's the calmness in Misato's voice that tells her that she has been doing this for too long. Rei grins. A thought broadcasts. And Unit 05 leans back, falling onto its back as forward momentum takes it the rest of the way and between the Trident's legs.

In Central Dogma, Makoto and Aoba yell out in sympathetic pain as they watch Go-Kun unleash a full barrage between the Trident's legs. Pieter shifts uneasily and Kaji throws up a little in his mouth.

"That's my girl," Yui says with a grin.

*

*

The armor's strong enough to take a pair of plasma blasts to the chest without stopping. Eyes glowing blue, Shinji wills Ichi onward, grappling with the arms of the Trident, forcing it back towards the center of the city, the enhanced exoskeleton of the F-Type armor increasing the Evangelion's already prodigious strength to new heights.

"*Shinji, the Angel is at 3:50 approach to Tokyo-3,"* Misato announces, "*Current projections say it's going to plow right through the Hospital when it enters."*

"What?! Doesn't the Hospital descend?"

"*Too many patients to move and the rigging would cause too many shocks. You're going to have to disable the Trident and join Mana, ASAP!"*

Swearing to himself, he wills Ichi to duck and roll. The Eva moves, too late, taking a Trident-powered kick to the chest which causes the girl's voice in his head to cry out in pain before a mechanized clawed fist slams into the Eva's face.

He swears, gripping the butterfly controls as the world pitches around him, his high synch ratio prompting a rivet of blood from his nose.

He looks up just as the cannons aim at his, at Ichi's face. The light and energy gathers around the focusing crystals...

*

*

The laser sight shows the path, through the folds of armor thanks to that one punch that has opened the miniscule path to the CPU. Adjusting the sight, he chambers the round and gazes for a moment on the wetware that forms the Trident's main computer.

"Hands off my boy," Gendo Ikari says, and squeezes the trigger.

The round accelerates to Mach 2 out of the sniper rifle, traveling the distance from the ammo building to the Trident's brain in the space of a fraction of the second. It is the material affected, not the impact, which causes the Trident to stumble back, closing its claws in base

reflex as the plasma cannons reach critical mass and detonate, sheering off the arms.

Eyes glowing, Unit 01 pitches forward, head butting the Trident and charging it, carrying them both forward as Shinji wills his ride underneath, using momentum to tip the robot back.

"*Three minutes, Shinji! Mana's approaching the target!"*

"That's not enough time!" he shouts, "It...wait. Mana? Mana, come in!"

*

*

"**~Hello my baby, hello my honey,**

"Hello my Ree-time gaaaal.

"Send me a kiss by wire,

"Baby, my butt's on fiiiiire!

"Please don't abuse me,

"Hate and misuse me,

"Or I'll /b/ all alone...

"So telephone, and leave my eyes alooo~ooone!~"

For a complete, reprehensible monster, Iruel has a wonderful singing voice. With the Iri's, as he calls them, as his backup singers he has been putting on quite a show for her and the rest of the audience, although she has an idea why there is such a crowd and why they all look like her.

So caught up in the applause and curious about the world around her, she barely notices as it all fades. It is only when her chair is gone that she notices, catching herself and standing before the lounge turns into a an open, empty grass field.

"**I know what you did. You are trying to distract me so I pause the count down on the Tridents. Aren't you?"**

She turns. Iruel is her height now, her size, his white wings folded out

and framing him. The smile of the Eva he wears is subdued and she can feel the cold fury in the beady eyes.

He moves quicker than she can, his hands wrapping around her throat, knuckles cracking as he begins to squeeze.

"**No. More. Talking.**"

Every word of his is biting, and sharp, none of the humor or play in the encounters past.

"**No. More. Song. And. Dance. I am going. To kill you. Right now.**"

She claws at his wrists, gasping for breath as he squeezes, tighter and tighter.

"**First. You. And then. Everyone. Else.**"

*

*

Rock fall off the sides of Rampel as it advances, tethered to the main body by tendrils of red and black. They crawl along the surface of the Cherubim and along the ground, paving the way. Each one is half the size of Jet Alone, and as the metal giant lurches towards it, standing in front of the hospital, she weighs her chances. She can charge, overclock the Arc reactor, and self destruct.

Yeah.

That'd be a good way to go. No idea if it'd take out the angel, though.

"Where's my backup?" she asks.

"*Evas are still busy with the Tridents, Mana,"* Kaji says, "*Start bombarding the Cherubim. See if you can slow it down."*

"Judging from it's size, I'm pretty sure a nuke wouldn't...alright."

Clicking open buttons on her controls, she depresses the firing switches.

"Opening fire."

Latches release over the legs and shoulders, kinetic missiles firing out. Accelerating to multiple times the speed of sound, they leave bow ways in their wake, cracking the windows of the hospital as they cover the distance between Jet Alone and Rampel...

Before stopping on the AT Field. It steadies, humming, before pulsing out into a wave which tosses Jet Alone off its feet and makes Mana scream out in sympathetic pain...

And everything goes black as the Cherubim's advance continues.

*

*

"**You. Are. Going. To. Die,**" Iruel growls, Asuka falling down to one knee, breath short and forced down her constricted throat, "**I want you to know this. I want you to. Feel it. My fingers on your throat. I want you. To know. That I may salvage your mind to keep me company. To watch as your friends die. Cursing your failure.**"

The smile returns, a deep steady laughter coming from the Angel's throat.

"**Are you crying for help? You're alone here. You know that.**"

"Wrong."

He looks up and his beady eyes open with a start as a red clad fist catches him in the mouth. Teeth crack and his hold releases as he stumbles back and Asuka falls onto her back, looking up...and seeing herself. Clad in a female version of Uri's red plug suit, a confident smirk on her face.

"**Wait...what? This is your strategy? You're going to get your crazy on me?**"

"You're crazy enough as is, *arseloch,*" the girl says, "You might be able to cow the others into backing down, but the Great Asuka Langely Sohryu doesn't back down from a fight!"

Iruel stands, rolling his neck and with a gesture summoning a black, double sided sword in his hand.

And then promptly screams as a lightning bold fires horizontally and forces him to one knee.

Raising her goggles, the Asuka in overalls and a heavy coat cocks the lightning cannon in her hand.

"Well, that worked," she says, "You always wanted to see if the Voltaic Cannon would fire, didn't you?"

The orange field pulses out. Rising, Iruel snarls, the double bladed sword becoming a long black lance.

"**You are not serious. Well, should've figured that you lilim figured out how to weaponize batshit at some point. So this is it? You're mind is fractured enough to go full bore party time on me? Well, I can work with that.**"

"*Can you, now?*"

The sky splits, four green eyes glowing, shining like the sun as they look down.

"**Well, shit.**"

The voice is squeaky, child like. It is a voice she knows well, but it seems odd with it not coming out of her mouth.

"*You underestimate her,*" the doll says, overshadowing them, overshadowing Iruel as his jaw drops, "*Just like everyone else has. You think she is crazy? Well, you're in for a rude surprise, aren't you? We're not separate people, Asuka. We're aspects of you. We're each part of a whole. And that whole is far, far greater than he will ever be.*"

*

*

Consciousness returns. Head swimming, eyes have trouble focusing. The Angel is almost upon them and Unit 01 is still fighting the Trident, Unit 05 still fighting its while Asuka does...something.

Something she can't do. All she can do is watch, watch herself die as the shambling mass of the Cherubim approaches, overshadowing her

like everything else.

"*...na respond. Mana? Can you hear me?"*

"I'm here, Kaji," she grunts, "Where's my backup?"

"*They're trying to get there, Mana, but they don't have time. Mana, the Cherubim has an AT Field. Jet Alone's weapons can't get through it on its own, but we have an...idea."*

Another failure. Is this it, then? Tokita's right. That smug son of a bitch is right. She hasn't taken down a single Angel on her own, so how can she do that now?

"*Mana! Listen to me!"*

Shinji's face appears in the corner of her eye, the image fuzzy. The receivers must have been busted.

"*I'm on my way, Mana. I'm not sure when I'll be there, but you have to listen to me! That thing is huge!"*

"Thanks for the pep talk," she growls.

"*I'm not done. There is a staffed and loaded hospital behind you, Mana. If you don't stop that thing, everyone there dies. I'm telling you that you will. You are the first one in on every single fight. It doesn't matter if you get knocked around. It doesn't matter if Jet Alone got damaged and it doesn't matter what that stupid bastard said to you. You. Never. Back. Down! And I am telling you not to back down right now! Hold the line!"*

*

*

The three dimensional hologram of Jet Alone Prime hovers in front of them, called up by Kaji's command so they could find something, anything, that could give the girl the edge she needed to engage the Angel. Rubbing her temples, Yui growls under her breath, arms folded as she turns back to Kaji.

"We need a larger scale weapon," she says, "Overlock the hammer and the reactor, maybe, but if we do that, Jet Alone's reactor might go

critical."

"Or not," Kyoko says, reaching into the diagram and zooming in. The single sphere at the center of Jet Alone's cockpit, just underneath the piloting ball is zoomed in.

"Is this is the AI core?" she asks.

"It is," Ritsuko responds, "Doctor Sohryu?"

Hands folded, fingers tented in front of her lips, Kyoko stares at the diagram, as Makoto reports Jet Alone's advance towards the Angel and the Angel reaching the :30 point of contact.

"It will do," she says.

She walks through the hologram, dismissing it and walking to Maya's terminal.

"Stand aside," she orders.

Maya turns, looking between Kyoko and Ritsuko before standing up and walking over to Akagi's side. Sitting at the terminal, Kyoko pulls out the keyboard, typing in instructions as a new screen opens up next to the Big Screen.

"Mari," she says, "Open up sealed files, Sohryu 20070408 password Armchair. Transfer over encrypted files to my terminal. MAGI access granted, full restraints released. Upload access towards Jet Alone Prime's AI core."

"Kyoko," Yui says, "What are you doing?"

"Time for a change," Kyoko says, and pushes her glasses up her nose, "MAGI, recognize voice command. Run *Synthesis."*

*

*

Rising to its feet, Jet Alone advances. Behind it, the windows of the hospital are cracked but the robot took the brunt of the impact. Those who can stand watch through windows as the robot begins its march,

hammer in hand as it advances towards the Angel that takes up the horizon.

In Dogma, three holographic keyboards hover around Kyoko as her fingers move in a blur, a three dimensional model of Jet Alone's AI core hovering before her as unused sectors blink red and used sectors wipe themselves clean.

"A life is based on memories," she says, not once pausing her typing, "Experiences. People. The closer you are to someone, the more you know of *them*, the greater the bond. Create something similar enough, give it power, and you can create something the unquantifiable reaches out to."

The air around Rampel shifts. The AT field warps Newton's laws around its mass as it accelerates, ripping up the earth beneath it. Its weight will carry it through the city. Its mass will collapse the city beneath it to let it fall like a mountain into the geofront.

First memory: birth/conception

Abandonment

Meaning

"Synthesis takes memories and experiences, the very fabric of personality and makes a new one, whole cloth. I did this with Unit 02, based on Dr. Ikari's notes. There never *was* a Contact Experiment with Zwei. There never needed to *be* one. I *created* Zwei's soul, instead."

Dwarfed beneath its mass, Jet Alone Prime stares down the Angel. Behind it, less than a quarter of the mile, the hospital is all that stands between Rampel and Tokyo-3.

Injury/darkness/despair

Meaning

Hope/?

Maya has never seen someone type that fast. Mana's entire history, her personality, her memories are laid out before them and inserted into the core. It spins, each block now accommodating something, each erg of free space filled up with a lifetime.

She opens her eyes on the field of battle. They stand with her, and there is

motion. Seeing the ball, the metal ball fall near them, she yells, pushing them aside and throwing herself on it.

Within Jet Alone Prime, the core glows. It begins to process, begins to whisper to itself. In a brief moment, something sparks deep within the depths of its technology.

"Welcome to NHIS, Captain Kirishima."

A single thought. A single erg of awareness, memories both its own and not its own beginning to form a whole picture.

"*...reporting for duty, Ma'am."*

Assessment. The world around it. The source of these memories, in the cockpit above it...

Never. Back. Down.

It is not *real.* It is not *alive.* But that does not matter. Neither, in many senses, is the source of these memories. New awareness upon new awareness, dragged into the waking work.

Not a failure. Never a failure.

Needed. Need.

Purpose.

Without prompting, the metal hands tighten around the hammer. What was it the movie said? What was it in that movie *source* enjoyed, keeps watching/learning from?

If you have to die, die for something.

CONNECTION ACHIEVED.

And in the piloting ball, for a brief moment, Mana's eyes glow blue as the Suit's receivers whisper something she knew she should never hear.

"*Synchronization at 51%."*

Releasing the controls, she throws out her arms and closes her eyes. And Rampel comes to a halt as it slams face first into an AT Field.

"*AT Field neutralized, Mana,*" Kaji yells, "*NOW!"*

The hammer comes up. Rockets on the back fire, and with a primal scream Mana lets her thought translate into action as Jet Alone swings and sheers off a solid chunk of Rampel's face. The claw that dragged it along goes flying, landing nearly a mile away as the hammer slams into the eye and breaks it like cheap glass.

Back jets firing, Jet Alone launches into the air, landing feet first through the remains of the eye and disappearing into the mass of Rampel. The entirety of the second Cherubim shudders, lurching forward on tiny legs, shrieking as hammer strikes echo through the city before it finally tips back and stops.

With a burst of electrical arcing, the side blows out, and covered in LCL and gore, Jet Alone Prime lurches out.

*

*

"*We are you.*"

"Your pride," the red plug suit wearing girl says, "And your courage."

"Your intelligence," the inventor says, "And your determination to see everything through."

"*Each of us, all around you, are a part of you,*" Dollie explains, "*You made us to help you. You made us to carry you along when no one else would. And we have, leading you to this moment.*"

"Is this is the last time I'll see you?" Asuka asks, tears brimming in her eyes.

The doll shakes her head.

"*No. No, it is not. We're part of you, you see. Whenever you need us, we're still part of you. What Misato said was true. She doesn't care about what you did, she only cares about you. So does Shinji, so does Dr. Ikari. So does everyone. As long as you are you, they will accept you.*"

"Not talking to yourself in public will probably help, though," the red suited girl says, and shrugs when the others glare at her, "What?"

"I don't think it's that easy," Asuka says, "It's just...natural for me. It's natural for me to see you around me, to talk to you. I can't promise

anything."

"*Then don't,"* the doll says, placing its corduroy hands on her shoulders, "*It will take time. Nothing like this is simple, but just for now, Zwei is helping us. Accept what you are. Accept that you mean something to the world around you."*

"Accept that you're smarter than just about everyone in the room," the inventor says, placing her hand on Asuka's shoulder, "And that you've saved the world before you even got in your Eva."

"Accept that you're braver than you ever thought you are," the plugsuit girl says, "And that you're a bigger ass-kicker than just about everyone on the team!"

"**Are you serious? You're counting on the power of a group hug?"**

Summoning the lance to his hand, Iruel begins advancing, wings spreading out as an orange halo unfolds around him rising into the air.

"**This has been fun, sweetie,"** he says, "**It really has. But I think we're just about done here."**

He lets the lance fly. Extending her arm, Asuka's eyes glow before the lance catches itself on an orange barrier, the world around them shattering into glass edges. The world reforms, rings of light lining the perimeter as Asuka rises into the air, her doubles disappearing as the world becomes a parched black plain with seas of yellow.

"**Okay. This is new."**

"You're forgetting something," Asuka says, as a pair of goggles appear on her head, "I'm crazy. Not *stupid.* I've been hacking the background while you've been blustering. This is going to end, and it's going to end now."

"**Glad to see you can hold conversation without st-st-stuttering,"** Iruel says, and chuckles, "**So we're playing a game?"**

Asuka nods, smiling.

"It's called Suckerpunch."

"**Suckerpunch?"**

"Yep."

The plugsuit girl appears behind Iruel and hammer fists him before vanishing, sending the Angel head first into the rock as the world becomes the bottom of an ocean, Asuka's clothing converting into a bulky metal dive suit with the numbers 02 stenciled in green on the shoulders.

The ground splits open. Towering over her, Iruel emerges, his form mottled green, slowly eaten by the digital virus that is his true form.

"**You try my patience,**" he says, his voice dead and monotone, "**This is my world.**"

"This is our world," Asuka responds, "You think you're some sort of benevolent God. You're not. You're a monster who tortures to make himself feel important, and you don't recognize that we beat you."

He grows bigger. His teeth are each the size of her, angry black eyes staring her down. The form of the MP Eva shatters, becoming a swarm of digital bacterium.

"This is his true form," the inventor says, appearing to Asuka's left, "A virus, evolving at an exponential rate."

"And all evolution ends with eventual destruction," Asuka continues, "And you don't want to accept that. That's why you keep fighting us. Because you're *stagnant."*

The world shifts, becoming a black, circuit lined plane. The digital virii fill the sky, forming into a vaguely human shape.

"Bluster all you want," the plugsuit girl says, appearing to Asuka's right, "But you're afraid of what we'll do to you *this time,*"

"**I am the Fear of God. I am the Angel of Terror. I will wipe this world clean of your organic sludge and remake it into my own.**"

"*And without ADAM, how does that work?"* Dollie asks, appearing behind Asuka, "*You said it yourself. Godhood's lost to you. So now you're just delusional. You're code breaking down.*"

The face comes down, the sky hovering above her.

"You. Are. An. Insect."

"No."

Lines of light wrap around her hand, her eyes glowing blue in time

with the pulse of the Core beneath her.

"I am Asuka Langely Sohryu," she says, "I am the Second Child and the pilot of Evangelion 02. And I have been dragging you into Zwei's mainframe the entire time we've been talking."

Four green eyes open in the ground beneath him, thousands of Asuka's appearing on the plane around her.

"I am everything you see here," she says, "Every aspect of the human psyche. Every last person here is part of me. Even alone..."

Thousands of hands glow, the sky behind Iruel scrubbed by digital light.

"We are Legion. Ready?"

She raises her hand. The plane below her glows, criss crossing into a circle of winding code as Iruel's face turns of arrogance to horror.

"Delete. *Bitch."*

The world erupts, Iruel screaming as he is scrubbed clean, screaming profanities and insults as the final bits of his code are burned away. Save for a small, infinitesimle piece that shrieks away, jumping through the interface...

*

*

And the Trident's eyes glow. The final Trident breaks off from Unit 02, running on all fours as the jet boosters activate and it takes off in flight.

AT Field unfloding around it, the Trident accelerates to supersonic speed, landing next to Jet Alone and leaping towards the corpse of Rampel, kicking off the giant robot as the form of the mecha itself seems to unfold.

*

*

"Blue pattern detected from the last Trident!" Aoba announces, "It's

merging with the Cherubim's corpse!"

Mari's floating holographic head blinks into existence over them, her expression one of worry and surprise.

"*Dr. Ikari, I just consulted with MAGI-00. It's Iruel. He got out!"*

*

*

The Trident disassembles, its AT Field flashing as metal liquifies, merging with the mountain sized mass of dead Cherubim. Metal plates surround the bulk, digging deep in. Shape is given, dividing the mountain down the center as strands of red LCL rise up and solidify into two massive arms.

The three Evas race as the mechanized, metal giant rises, at least three times their height as the form shifts into a flawless white humanoid form.

The face forms last, six red eyes opening vertically on the gunmetal gray brow as it raises its hands and the light pulses around it.

"**It feels good to be physical,**" Iruel's voice booms, "**Ah, yes. Concrete form. A distinct retreat from that which I was, but necessary nonetheless. I am reasonably sure I can afford to trade the immutable nature of the Virus for a working S2 organ.**"

The form rises into the air, eyes glowing as lines of light trace along the path before it and erupt into flame, throwing back Unit 05 and bringing Unit 02 to one knee. The form chuckles, face parting to accommodate the teeth of Iruel's grin.

"**I should have done this ages ago. But, you Lilim can't help but leave me ways to screw you over.**"

The hand extends and Unit 01 rises into the air, travling over towards Iruel as the hand wraps around the Eva's head.

"This is our potential," Iruel states, "**The Cherubim, born directly from ADAM. A partial complimentation, but this is power. This is our presence. We were worshipped as gods by your distant**

ancestors and this is what we will become. Now would be a good time to start kneeling."

The purple hands grip the fingers, parting them as the jaw locks pull and stretch. The glowing eyes of Iruel narrow, and he chuckles, his toothy grin splitting his face.

"**Right. Right. This is where you make your grand heroic speech about justice, isn't it? Let's get all the cliches out of the way.**"

The light dims. The air shifts purple, and the grip on Unit 01 relaxes. Falling towards the ground, Iruel lands in a crouch, the ground shaking as he tries to rise...

Only to receive a hammer to the face.

"*Synthesis complete,*" Jet Alone Prime announces, "*You had this coming."*

The hammer breaks on Iruel's face, sending metal and angelic matter flying across the city limits. Cannons fire out, the AT Field barely deflecting them as Unit 01 braces itself and thrusts its hands forward, its own presence pushing against Iruel's.

"*This is where it ends,"* Shinji growls, "*We never called ourselves heroes, and we certainly never cared about justice. We're doing what anyone else would in our shoes, in our lives! You brought this war to us! We're doing what any human would do!"*

The six eyes pulse, the sky turning scarlet as the massive form of the Angel rises, six wings of orange light folding out from its back. Almost flawless, veins of white light crack the metallic surface as Unit 02 catches up with them, extending its hands as its field joins Unit 01 and Jet Alone's own.

"**You honestly don't think this saves you, does it?**" Iruel growls, "**Your race is doomed. It's been damned from the start!**"

*

*

Memories, of the first time she piloted, joining with the memories of / source/ give sentience. Synthesis is complete. Soul implanted in JAP AI

core.

Synchronization rising. 57% 59%

In Central Dogma, Yui watches with her mouth open. She cannot believe what she sees. If she was not there, she wouldn't have believed it were possible.

"Doctor Ikari, we're reading a build up in the Angel's S2 engine!"

*

*

"Your entire species was doomed from the start. Birthed from an insane deviant who cares NOTHING for the fate of your race. We are your salvation through destruction and recreation, and the best you can do is try to shoot us until we can't move!"

The wings extend into a shape reminiscent of the Tree of Sephirot. The center of Iruel's chest begins to glow, the Fruit of Life within him gathering mass.

"**I have had enough. Existence is done for me, and I will take you all with me. The last thing I want you to know is that your worthless existence will come to an end soon enough. All of you. Split open like rotted fruit.**"

"*Yeah, great. You're all godlike and stuff, and you make us look like pond scum by existing. But we're not afraid."*

Jet Alone lurches through the malestrom. Plates along its arms shed, the circle of light at its chest pulsing as it overclocks.

"*For though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death,"* Mana announces, "*I will fear no evil. Not now. For I AM 35,000 tons of FUCK YOU."*

Within the pilot ball, her eyes glow, her senses expanding to the entirety of her chariot. The AI core pulses, its pulses like heartbeats. Shoulder plates fall off and crash into the ground, light gathering around the mechas hands and joining its AT Field as the light and energy takes physical shape.

The Light of her Soul wills Jet Alone airborne as the field coalesces,

first a staff between the hands, then the great head of the Hammer.

She savors the look on Iruel's face, the complete and utter shock before she swings and launches him airborne.

"*Rei! He's going critical,"* Shinji shouts, "*Now!"*

*

*

It was a simple matter to hack the launch catapult controls and commandeer one of them. It was a simple matter to put herself in the position at the city-center launch platform and wait for Mana to launch the Angel skyward.

It's like her entire life has been leading to this moment.

"*Rei,"* Misato asks, appearing in her right eye, "*What are you doing?"*

It's the lack of shock or surprise to her voice that tells her Misato may have been doing this job for too long.

"I'm destroying the Angel," Rei responds, "Silly."

Go-Kun elbows launch control, the electromagnetic rails firing off and sending the Eva in the overclocked cage to the surface, releasing Unit 05 upon entry and sending it rocketing skywards towards Iruel.

"Ready?" Rei asks.

In response, her eyes flash, glowing solid red as she and the Core link.

"Completion at 100%. Synchronization at 237%. Level 6 functionality unlocked."

*

*

"I think we should not find it at all surprising that Go-Kun initiated the

construction of something in the Dirac Armory," Ritsuko states, as the Big Screen focuses on Unit 05 fast approaching the launched Iruel, "Now may be a good time to not look directly at the screen."

Yui turns to Ritsuko and then back to the screen.

"Tint it," she says, "I want to see this."

*

*

"*Level 6 functionality unlocked,"* the computerized voice states, "*Accessing AT Drill."*

Go-Kun's right arm disappears, lines of white tracing the air before a rip in space itself releases a drill arm as long as the Evangelion is tall, the grooves silver and glowing in the sunlight. Go-Kun's visor glows gold, lines of orange light tracing around the arm and forming into an outline of a larger shape.

Booster jets on the back of the arm glow and fire, accelerating Unit 05 on its collision course with the Angel. Six eyes narrow and Iruel has just enough time as the AT Field takes the form of a drill three times the size of Unit 05 for last words.

"**I hate you Lilim SO MUCH...**"

"Sorry," Rei says, waving, "But we can't hear you over the sound of us kicking your ass. Go-Kun!"

The jaw locks release. Eyes glowing in tune with her Evangelion's, she grabs the joy stick as their voices rise in unison.

"**GIGA!**"

The jets fire off, the energy field spinning like a top.

"**DRILL!**"

She pushes the joystick forward, momentum carrying them both towards the Angel's mass.

"**BUH-REAKAAAH!**"

The drill collides, shredding into Iruel as the Angel gives off one last,

enraged scream. And as the core cracks and the S2 organ detonates, it explodes like a second sun in the sky, raining down its remains like red snowfall.

*

*

In Central Dogma, they shield their eyes as the explosion of Iruel flashes the Big Screen white, Aoba yelling out while Yui, Misato, and Akagi click off their shades with wide grins on their faces.

"That's my girl," Yui says, "Maya?"

"Hold on," Ibuki groans, "Need to be able to see again."

"I love those Plan B's," Misato says, "It's the sort of plans I see through my eyelids."

*

*

The shockwaves fade harmlessly in the sky, jets firing off as Unit 05 descends and lands in a crouch next to the other Evas and Jet Alone. Popping the entry plug out, Rei climbs out and slides down the drill, landing near where the others have gathered before skipping over.

The four stand together, watching as the light of Iruel's detonation shines in the sky, the remains falling around them in light precipitation.

"Well, there's something you don't see every day," Mana says.

"Mm-hm," Rei responds, leaning back and forth on her heels, "Soooo~ooo you alright?"

Jet Alone is on one knee. Mana grins, arms folded.

"Let's see them decommision my ass now."

*

*

It managed to split off just enough to not be detected. He managed to preserve just enough, like that defeatist Sandalphon or that coward Sachiel. Just enough material to take the form of an insect, with a small core the size of the head of a pin to fly away just as that crazy girl destroyed his main mass.

He is Iruel.

He is Legion. Strike one down, more will rise...

Well, in time.

Flitting through the air, he follows the scent of matter, Angelic matter, he can feed on to regain some of his glory, some of his power.

All he needs is time.

All he needs is-

SNAP.

The beak snaps on the horsefly, and the penguin shakes his head, coughing as the insect skitters before dying, falling down his throat.

"*WARK!*"

Shinji and Asuka stare at the penguin as it turns and walks back into the apartment, walking into his fridge and slamming the door behind him.

"D-Did Pen Pen just eat an insect?" Asuka asks.

He nods, shaking his head with a sigh.

"S-so," she says, winding her fingers with his own, "I th-think your mother's still upset with me."

"Give her time," he responds, leaning in and pulling her into a hug, "I think she's more upset about being wrong for once."

"Happens to e-everyone," she responds, "Doesn't it?"

"Statistically, even to my mom."

And with a laugh between the two, as they press their foreheads against each other, they walk hand and hand into the apartment.

Chapter 39: To Have and to Hold

-

-

-

I AM

Through license of he who was called "I AM" I have come.

Though I shall never touch my feet to the Base Earth on my most blessed mission, I have come.

I am the Keeper of Father.

I am separate from my Brothers, both above and below them.

I am the Void.

I am the bridge between the worlds and the Hole of the Worm.

I am the Jaws of God.

Angel of Night.

I am Leliel.

I have come.

*

*

The black mass has taken up several city blocks of Tokyo-3, buildings sinking into it like a tarpit. The two evangelions patrol the edges of the Angel, near the spot where Unit 01 disappeared some hours ago. Misato didn't take to the idea of NERV's plan very well.

But, they were right.

The Angel can't just be given Unit 01, and it's been long enough that

his life support should have given out by now.

So, the only thing left is to drop every N2 mine in there and hope it takes out the Angel.

"Damn it."

Cursing herself, Asuka wills Unit 02 onward. She shouldn't be upset. Sooner or later, one of them was bound to mess up and this was going to happen. One of them was going to die.

"Damn it," she whispers again. And things were just getting good, to. Well, maybe a little, not that she ever knew how to keep things going well. One extreme to another, they always said. Like she was intentionally denying herself happiness.

Times like this she wishes she didn't throw away that doll before heading to Japan. She can't just...talk to them like she could to it. Because they always would judge, and wait for their turn to dig in.

"*Asuka,"* Misato says, her face appearing in her right eye, "*We're almost ready to begin. You and Rei will take positions around the Angel's perimeter and project your AT Fields."*

"Understood," Asuka says, "Is there any chance we'll save the idiot's life?"

"*The MAGI says the chance is .000000001 percent...well, that was the chance he'd activate the Eva in the first place. Maybe his luck hasn't run out."*

The screen flickers off. No one believes that. This isn't a rescue. This is an execution. It makes her sick to watch this, but she knows she has to follow orders. Reaching her mind out to her Eva, Unit 02 takes its position, the orange field flickering alongside her fellow pilot's, as the black mass begins to shift...

And it rises.

"The Hell-"

The mass shrinks, becoming the same white lined sphere it was originally, rising into the air and flipping, opening into a new hole. Something moves inside it, the shadow rippling...

And Unit 01 falls out, slamming head first into the city before

collapsing with a hiss of steam.

Part of her screams to run to the purple Eva and yank the entry plug out *right now* and make sure he's alive, but every other part tells her to wait, don't show weakness, and-

"*Asuka?"*

The image is static in her eye, but the voice is his.

"*Asuka, what the...wait, what are you doing here?"*

"Doing here?" she asks, straightening up in her cockpit seat, "Like *I* was going to get eaten by the Angel, to? *Someone* has to do something smart around here!"

*

*

Blinking, Shinji stares at the Unit 02 across from him mouthing a response and wisely keeping silent.

"That was...*what the Hell?"*

*"*Very odd," Yui says, tapping on the touch screen in the second seat set up behind him, "Unit 01's new sensors are getting some...odd readings from Unit 02. I think we may have taken a wrong turn in the Dirac."

The audio channel opens again, split by high pitched screaming as Shinji wills Unit 01 to look up. The Eva steps back, arms out, and catches Unit 02 as it falls from the black portal, helping it stand. This last for all of ten seconds before Unit 05 falls through the portal and flattens them both.

"*AWWW YEAAAAAH! I just found me a new hobby!"*

"Rei, now's not the best time," Shinji groans, Unit 01 pushing off Go-Kun before rising as he scans over the area, "Wait...is that *Unit 00?*"

"We definitely took a wrong turn," Yui responds.

And it all goes to Hell when Unit 00 opens fire.

-

-

Chapter 39: To Have and to Hold

-

-

"Shit!"

Extending out a hand, Unit 01's eyes glow and a slow growl escapes its sealed mouth, turning the sky purple as a wall of orange light, rippling hexagons, appears between it and the wall of bullets heading their way. The light shifts, the bullets stopping before falling to the ground, and with a roar Unit 05 charges.

"Rei!" Shinji shouts, "We don't know if they're hostile or not!"

"They're shooting at us, Shinji," Yui responds, "I think that answers the question."

"Mom..."

"Oh, alright," she sighs, clicking on the communicator on her ear, "Rei, it's Yui. Don't attack them. Let's talk this out."

"Thanks," he responds, "Asuka? What's your status?"

"*We're fine,"* Asuka says, appearing in his right eye, "*Mother's fine, to. D-does Dr. Ikari know where we are?"*

"Working on it. I'm opening a channel to...to whoever it is we're facing and seeing what happens. Could you make sure Rei doesn't go drill happy on them?"

Sending the thought, thought becomes reality and Unit 01 raises its hands, walking forward with slow, measured steps towards the other Unit 02 and Unit 00.

"If you're listening," he says, "My name is Shinji Ikari. We're obviously not from around here but we are not hostile. Please stand down and escort us to somewhere we can talk and we will explain everything."

Yui leans in, her own silver and black plug suit glowing with the inborn computers.

"Good," she says, "Very curious, though. I do have some ideas."

"Like?"

"Like when we exited the Dirac, we didn't just exit at the wrong place. We exited in the wrong *Universe."*

*

*

Leilel blinks, if such a thing were possible for a formless mass of the Dirac. Peering through itself, it turns its eye upon another Earth.

"I'm going to kill that girl," Pieter Sohryu says, walking into the mausoleum as the doors close behind him, "If not for the fact that we just got a ping off the Triple Heavy Maser which told us they're all alive."

Looking up from incidence reports, Gendo Ikari, Supreme Commander of NERV and although he does not show it, worried husband and father, nods. His second in Command stands at attention as he has a tendency of doing, which is good considering the military background.

"Any audio?" he asks.

"No," Pieter responds, "But we're working on that. Akagi's going through the notes left by Asuka on operating the Dirac Ansible she constructed during Shinji's stay in the Dirac. Only problem is that the instruction manual's in the form of about 40,000 post it notes."

"I see. Life support?"

"Shinji can bring up new batteries from the Dirac Armory," Pieter responds, "As long as they keep their wits about them, they'll be fine, and we'll get them all home. Commander."

Gendo nods, assuming his typical position.

"So," he says, "Do you want to chew out Kirishima first, or should I?"

The speakers crackle, the holographic head of Mari appearing.

"*Already took the initiative, sir,"* Mari says, "*Oh, by the way, small detail. It seems something just emerged from the Dirac, and it's rather pissed."*

*

*

Attention of the Angel of Night turns, shifting towards that which was before.

The spare Cages were already set up by the time they arrived. Needless to say, the entire situation was met with some level of disbelief and skepticism, as the three Evangelions, two of which they were familiar with and one of which looked nothing like anything they had on the drawing boards were lowered into their booths.

The plugs eject, draining LCL down towards the reservoirs on the bottom level of the Cages as the plug of Unit 01 opens up and a boy at least a year older than the Shinji they knew climbs out. Other things become readily apparent. The way he carries himself, for one. He doesn't slouch, and the way he nonchalantly takes the LCL bucket and almost from practice clears out the orange liquid from his lungs makes it look like he knows what he's doing.

Asuka snorts. Not very ladylike, but everyone's giving more attention to their new 'guests' anyway, so she can get away with it.

Someone else climbs out of Unit 01's plug. A woman, with brown hair and in a silver and black plugsuit. She's older than them. Way older. Has to be in her thirties or forties. How the Hell did they get her in a plug? Is she a backup pilot or something?

Well, question that later. They still have no idea how to get the idiot out of the trap he's in. The other Eva looks interesting, though. It's like they through everything that made an Eva an Eva out the window and then slapped on some construction equipment. It has a drill. A *drill.* Not counting the crab spider legs or the claw arm, it just strikes her as wrong.

Well, at least they have another Unit 02. Wherever these people come from has some taste.

The entry plug to the giant green eyesore opens, and out climbs...

Out climbs...

Rei?

Is that...*Rei?*

NO.

No, that's not Wondergirl who just slid down the drill arm of the giant robot and hopped onto a catwalk. That can't *possibly* be the girl who's now *skipping* over to Shinji and bear hugging him.

"Well, that's something you don't see every day," Misato says, standing next to her, weakly waving as 'Rei' waves back before skipping off to the showers, "I need a *beer*."

*

*

Well enough in hand, the Jaws of God thinks, to turn back to where it deposited the other traveler.

Prime, as they have come to call Jet Alone, lifts up its hammer as the roaring figure closes in, pulling back and swinging. 15,000 tons of progressive Hammer slams into the face of the purple giant and launches it across downtown Tokyo-3, jets lighting up to send the mecha in pursuit.

"*Mana, report!"* Misato yells.

"Hell if I know, Ma'am," Mana responds, grinning underneath the Suit's helmet, "But I can give you a good guess."

Rising from the rubble of one of the ammo buildings, the form nearly as tall as Jet Alone rises, shrugging off debris and snorting out a plume of steam. Eyes flashing yellow, it charges, arms out wide, jaw snapped open and roaring.

"Awww," Mana coos, "Ichi's havin' a temper tantrum? Poor baby!"

Prime extends a hand, the berserk Unit 01 ramming face first into an AT Field before stumbling back.

"Night night."

And one hammer blow to the face, and it's over.

*

*

It believes that Captain Kirishima is currently, as ye Lilim say, batting 1.000 against berserk Lilithspawn. Shifting its awareness, it turns back gingerly towards the other world.

"As far as we can tell, what the Angel functions as is a non-gravitational Reissner-Nordstrom black hole. Using the Dirac Sea as its medium, it creates non gravitational wormhole-type black holes to deposit whatever its target is in the destination. A-at least that's the theory."

Ritsuko Akagi blinks, staring as Asuka, or at least the girl they think is the...as ridiculous as it sounds to her...*counterpart* to the Second Child, explain in detail how the Angel somehow shunted them through Universes.

What breaks her fragile hold on this being *real* is that she is getting the math *right*.

*

*

"So we have an Angel that eats its enemies and craps them out in a different universe," Misato mutters to herself, pacing the small room with her arms folded and lips pursed, "And the Universe you're from is similar, but...different?"

"A little," Shinji responds, sitting in front of Misato in the holding cell, "We haven't really looked at your history yet, but there's got to be some differences."

"Like?" she asks.

"Well, from what I can tell Unit 00 hasn't been wrecked yet," he says, "So that means at least one Angel went differently. There's a lot that could happen. And if we're here, who knows where...I guess, *I* ended up."

*

*

Akagi nods, staring at the whiteboard that 'Asuka' was working at during the debriefing.

"I do see an error," Ritsuko says, "Gravitational constant."

Asuka turns, staring at the board...and nods.

"So do I," she says, and walks over, erasing the part and tapping the marker to her lip before entering in new numbers, "Thank you."

Staring at the board, Ritsuko slowly takes off her glasses and rubs the bridge of her nose.

"Excuse me," she says, and walks out, walking to the main area of the holding cells to find Misato pacing.

"Well?" the purple haired Major asks.

"Asuka just accepted criticism for a formula and thanked me," Ritsuko responds, muttering to herself to find her cigarettes forgotten, "I know this isn't the time for jokes, but can we keep her?"

"Yeah, well, I've got better news," Misato says with a grin, "If the kid's right, Shinji's still alive."

"The chances of-"

"That Angel craps its victims out into another universe, Ritz. We thought it just keeps them there, but we were *wrong* in at least one case, and-"

A door slams, and they turn just in time to see Sub Commander Fuyutsuki break into a sprint down the hall from the cell he was talking to Rei in.

"Fast for an old guy," Misato says, "What's he spooked about?"

"You *have* met their Rei, haven't you?"

*

*

The mausoleum doors slam open, and it takes a moment for the occupant of the office to look up from the financing report to see Kozou Fuyutsuki make it halfway across the Sephirot Tree-lit room

before bracing on his knees and panting.

"Ikari," he gasps, "We have a situation."

"The imposters," Gendo Ikari, Supreme Commander of NERV, says, "I am aware."

"Not imposters, Ikari. Rei knows *everything."*

"Everything?"

"Except ADAM. She says they *killed* it," Fuyutsuki responds, pulling up a chair and bracing on it, "It sounded ridiculous, but she spelled out *everything*."

"Killed it," Ikari says, folding his hands under his nose, "Then how do they intend to-"

"I believe we could ask the other passengers on the Evas."

"I was not aware of other passengers."

"You didn't want to be informed," Fuyutsuki responds, "But one of them turned out to be-"

"MAGI, recognize voice imprint and seal all doors."

Shutters come down on the main doors and the door hidden in the side wall. Walking in, cracking her knuckles, Yui Ikari gives off a grin much like that of her daughter's as the unflappable Commander of NERV finds himself at a loss for words.

"Hello, dear," she says, "You'll *never* believe the day I just had."

The draw opens in the desk, a white gloved hand reaching for the gun.

"Rei."

The vent cover falls to the floor next to the desk, and the startled Gendo looks up just as Rei dives in, the hexagonal field flashing and knocking her through the air as Ikari grabs his now smoking right hand with a grunt.

To her credit, Rei tucks into a roll and lands on her feet, right next to Yui as she stares at him with her jaw hanging open.

"Dear God," she says, "You actually *went and did it,* didn't you?"

He says nothing, staring at her. Slowly, Yui clenches her fist, leveling her gaze at Fuyutsuki and almost mentally forcing him to sit down.

"Release the pilots," Yui says, "They know nothing about the larger plans, only Rei, and she keeps secrets very well."

"Agreed," Gendo responds.

Rei rocks back and forth on her heels, eyes darting between her parents, or at least one of her parents and the quantum duplicate of the other.

"Rei," Yui says, "Go back to your brother and Asuka. Keep them and Kyoko out of trouble. We need to talk."

Rei nods, and with a hop leaps off the Commander's desk and back into the air vent.

*

*

Leliel is not easily scared. It believes it may need to consider whether or not it actually has pants that need to be changed.

"The basic story is, I'm debriefing you because you're a German national and not technically part of NERV. I'm the UN Inspector, after all, so this being foreign soil, I get to ask you the questions. Not that I mind, of course. Any time along with a beautiful woman's an added job perk."

The ponytailed man smirks as he lights the cigarette, sitting across from Kyoko in the small cell with the mirror on one side. The sight is not bad to look at, he thinks. She's still in her dark red and green plug suit, although her hair has been washed and no longer in the ponytail, the plugsuits leave little to the imagination.

"I'm glad to see we can change entire space time continuums and you still remain a complete letch and manwhore."

On the other side of the glass, Misato grins.

"I like her."

"Quite the compliment from a dead woman," Kaji says with a grin, "The main reason we're having trouble believing you, Dr. Sohryu, is

that Kyoko Sohryu died nine years ago. And yet, every single bit of data we're getting from you comes back that you are said dead woman."

"Strange world," Kyoko says with a grin, leaning back in the chair, "I will admit I have not had the chance to peruse local history, but please, ask your questions. It's boring, otherwise."

"Alright, then," he responds, folding his hands on the table, cigarette hanging from his mouth, "Name."

"Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu, PhD," she says, "Divorced from Pieter Sohryu. Employed by NERV-2 on loan to NERV-1 as secondary head of Project E."

"Alright, that covers the basics," he responds, "We have some questions about your Evangelions. What exactly are Unit 02 and Unit 01 running on?"

"They run because the cores are active," she responds, "Just like yours. In this case, they are fitted with N2 battery packs."

He frowns. She smiles. She also knows enough to realize that anything she says gets sent back to the Old Men. Kihl always likened her as his spy, but hopefully was blinded by nationalism to the point of overlooking that she is *not* subtle.

"Well, our big question is the four legged Eva," Kaji says, tapping his fingers on the desk, "What exactly is that?"

"Provisional Unit 05," she responds, and purses her lips, "It answers to 'Go-Kun', which was a nickname given to it by Lieutenant Ibuki that stuck. It is a prototype developed by the American branch by adding mechanical parts to an Eva test body."

She leans forward, leaning one elbow onto the arm rest.

"As for how it runs, that's also an N2 reactor. You'd have to ask the American branch how that works. I focus on the AI cores. And also bringing the Evangelions to life."

Another smirk.

"Any more questions?"

"Yeah. What are you doing for dinner this evening?"

She perks an eyebrow, grinning.

"I remember when you asked me that back where I came from, when we were both posted at the NERV-Berlin branch."

"And what happened?"

"You stopped crying after an hour and then avoided me like the plague for the next two weeks."

Neither reacts to the ominous, maniacal laughter from the other side of the window.

"Okay," Kaji says, putting out his cigarette, "Welcome to Tokyo-3, Dr. Sohryu."

*

*

They were released on the Commander's orders, and told they were going to go home with Katsuragi to an apartment in the Geofront, who here is for some reason a Major. Well, the Commander always had their best interests in heart back home, so this can't be any different, so she found herself one of the unused offices and got to work. Thankfully, she included a de-ionization package for her plugsuit to get rid of the LCL. She still had to wash her hair, but she only keeps it just past her shoulders nowadays.

Opening the duffle, Asuka carefully pulls out the box, untying the strings keeping it closed and reaching in. One of the long term projects she's been assigned to by Dr. Ikari is more modular avatar bodies for the Evangelions, and to that extent she bought this on Ebay.

It is small and white with a blade plexiglass covering for the delicate sensors occupying the head, including the camera 'eyes' and olfactory sensors she jury rigged, with a bluetooth adaptor to link it directly to the Core.

The Aibo, while an expensive toy primarily, is also a good testbed for a smaller avatar body due to its wireless capabilities.

Clicking on the power button behind its neck, she opens her laptop and begins typing code as the robot dog stares at her, waiting for commands.

"Okay," she says, to herself, "Okay. Okay. Okay okay okay...let's see if this works."

The robot tilts its head. The wire tail wags from side to side, and with a crackle, the speakers built into its mouth come to life.

"MASTER!"

"Good morning, Zwei. How do you feel?"

The robot sits on its hind legs, wire tail flapping back and forth as its speakers crackle, making a sound akin to a panting dog.

"All systems functional, MASTER. Where are we?"

"It's a long story, Zwei. More or less, the Angel sent us someplace else. What do you remember?"

"*Accessing memory logs, MASTER. Captain Kirishima fired on the ANGEL! and caused it to bring us into the nullspacevoid, MASTER. JSSDF prime directive regarding spacetime rips is to fire on any Dirac Sea opening to prevent return of ANGEL! ADAM."*

"So, you're me."

Asuka turns as Zwei tilts his head as the girl approaches. She is dressed in a middle school uniform, one of the gaudy green and white things. Her hair falls down her back and there are red baretts in her hair just like hers, and it takes Asuka a moment to recognize herself in the girl.

It is odd, looking at yourself but not yourself. Zwei rears up and flicks his head from Asuka to Asuka, tilting his head in confusion.

"Well, not bad," the younger Asuka says, "Heard you impressed the bottle blonde with math, so you have those points at least. Cute robot."

"*MASTER?*"

"Zwei, this was part of the 'other place' that I m-mentioned," Asuka responds, patting the robot on the head, "Um...I haven't had a ch-chance to really get to a computer or MAGI terminal yet, so I'm not sure about our h-history."

The other Asuka purses her lips, dragging a chair over and sitting across from her.

"So, how's Uri?" Asuka asks, as Zwei hops onto her lap.

"Uri?" the younger girl responds.

"Our brother."

"He's...fine," the younger girl says, Asuka not noticing the uneven tone, "Oh, yeah. He's fine. Just sent me a letter from Germany. Has a new girlfriend. Okay, let's get to the questions about...me, I guess. You're Unit 02's pilot?"

Asuka nods. Zwei wags his tail.

"Yes," she says, "We call him Zwei."

"Him?"

"He's obviously male," she responds, stroking the back of the white dog robot, "Although not as vocal a-as Ichi or Go-Kun."

"Yeah," the younger Asuka says, "And lose the stutter, it bothers me. So, wasn't too impressed with how you handled the fight, though. I figured you'd be a lot better trained, especially if you're older than me."

"True," Asuka sighs, scratching behind Zwei's ear, "Although, I haven't had much time for training. It's crisis after c-crisis, and I still have my job as Dr. Ikari's assistant."

Sighing, she taps on the holographic computer display over the left wrist, checking diagnostics for the bluetooth signal.

"Dr. Ikari?"

"Shinji's mother," she responds, looking through the display at her other, "Still, I don't think I did *that* bad. I o-only have...um...let's see...right. I only have about two months experience as a pilot, after all."

So caught up in her work she doesn't really notice as the other Asuka's jaw opens. For a few minutes, at least, she checks the signal and goes over the data from Unit 02's core and memory hard drives. At very least, since she doesn't think she can just walk into the Cage and do a diagnostic, she can get some idea of what they are dealing with. And maybe, how to get home.

"Riiiiight," the other Asuka says, "So...how come Wondergirl's in

that...thing..."

"Go-Kun?"

"Yeah. Go-Kun. What happened to Unit-00?"

Asuka shifts from side to side, tapping her fingers.

"I...well, I k-kind of killed it."

"You. Killed it," the other Asuka asks, rolling the words around her mouth.

"It would have killed everyone else if I didn't,"

"Yeah, ours has that problem to."

Asuka shrugs.

"It doesn't like Dr. Ikari," she responds, turning back to Zwei, "And then Rei and I had to stop the Angel. I didn't really think about it afterwards."

"Yeah, about your...Rei..."

"Oh, yes," Asuka says, "She can be...jarring. She was like that when we first met, but we had been emailing each other for years before we met in p-person. She's nowhere near as b-bad as her sisters, though."

"There's more of her?"

Asuka nods.

"Seven of them," she says with a smile, and stops, tapping her fingers as Zwei nuzzles her leg, "I'm...um...n-not supposed to t-talk about them."

"Yeah, I imagine," the other Asuka deadpans, "So...wait. You've only been a pilot for *two months?"*

Asuka nods. Zwei does, as well.

"Well, yes," she responds, "Uri was the pilot up until our s-sister died. I kind of ended up falling into the Entry Plug a f-few times. First time was on the *Over the Rainbow."*

*"*Wait wait..."

Rubbing her temples, the other Asuka shakes her head and stares at her.

"If you're two years older than me," she says, "And if the Rainbow was two months ago, then we've been fighting the Angels for *Two years?"*

"No," Asuka responds, "And it was three months ago. Sandalphon was two months ago."

"Sanda-who?"

"The other fish Angel," Asuka responds, "Um...he mind controlled Tokyo-3 and we had to stop him from reaching Terminal Dogma."

A knocking on the door, and Zwei hops back onto all fours, wagging his tail as Shinji peaks his head in. Changes to a NERV uniform that seems slightly oversized, he has a separate bag in his hand and a smile on his face.

"Hey," he says, "They gave us some clothes to change into and Misato's going to take us home."

Putting Zwei down, Asuka gets up, walking over to Shinji and taking the bag in exchange for a peck on the lips. She smiles as his arms wrap around her, wrapping her own around his shoulders.

"Is she..."

"Yes," she responds, "We were just talking."

They both turn and Shinji waves. The other Asuka, if she can even notice that, does not wave back. Instead, she stares at them with her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open, one eyebrow raised and something resembling a gurgling sound coming out of her mouth.

Standing up, head tilting as she stares at them, slowly walking towards the door for what she thinks she be fresh air. It's only around then that she notices the ventilation grate on the floor.

"Heee~ey."

She looks up, locking eyes with the red eyed, hanging upside down Rei Ayanami.

"What'cha doin'?"

Asuka screams, stumbling back, before ducking underneath Rei and

running out of the room.

*

*

It has many facets of many dimensions, rotating from a single dot to an entire universe, and all of its existence is glad it ejected the lilithian as soon as possible. And so, it shifts its attention to the other world.

"I don't like this," Pieter says, pacing the office, "We recover Unit 01. Inside is Shinji, but for no reason we can think of he's two years *younger* and claims that his mother died ten years ago. Not only that, but he's never heard of Kyoko before and has no idea where Unit 02 and Unit 05 are."

Sitting at his desk, Gendo nods. In truth, the thoughts going through his head are the same, but less pleasant. If he was right, Yui was dead, and beyond any hope of even Instrumentality salvaging. Knuckles crack in his folded hands, his brow furrowed as he tries to think the situation through.

"We received a signal that they were safe," he says, "It's a possible time dialation. The Angel does rotate them through two dimensional space."

"Or it's the third option."

Walking in, Misato stands in front of the desk with her hands folded behind her.

"Katsuragi?" Pieter asks.

"I just interviewed him," Misato responds, "He just told me about the Angels he fought, and several of them were ones we have no record of. He's not *our* Shinji."

*

*

Sitting up in the hospital bed, Shinji Ikari props himself up on his pillow as he considers his surroundings. The ceiling is familiar, but many things aren't. Shifting his weight onto his feet, he stands up next

to the bed, legs protesting from what feel like weeks of not moving. He doesn't know how long he was in the Entry Plug.

He blacked out after a while. He woke up here, then he was interviewed by someone they claimed was the Sub Commander but who looked nothing like Fuyutsuki, and then by Misato.

It all seems...wrong. Weird.

Ah. You are awake.

Projectors click to life above, by the lights, and the light forms into the image of a six foot tall floating fish with a vertical eye stack and two tendrils hanging from his mouth.

Good morning, Pilot Ikari, Junior says, **We wished to speak with you when you returned from the body of our brother.**

Shinji Ikari, 14-year old Pilot of Evangelion 01, stares at the holographic image of the Angel Sandalphon hovering before him. And after a few seconds, his eyes roll up and he collapses to the floor.

*

*

...

...

Leliel feels a level of pity. Nonetheless, it turns back to the other world.

Muttering teutonic swear words to herself, she stomps along the corridors of NERV. Most are wise enough to keep out of her way when she's in this mood, of course. Those that aren't soon learn otherwise. Right now, however, Asuka Langely Sohryu's mind is more or less consumed by the image burning itself into her brain of...her, that *girl* and Shinji *kissing.*

It was disgusting! She was supposed to be her! She would never kiss that perverted idiot if she had a choice.

They were all insane. They had to be. They were all crazy and wrong and perverted because that was the only way she could explain how their brains worked, because it was not supposed to *be* like that.

Yeah, so what if she knows her science. She has a degree, to. She worked her ass off to get it while training to pilot Eva, and this girl's only been piloting for two months.

That can't be right. What jackass over in NERV-Berlin wouldn't let her pilot in that world? Obviously some idiot who didn't know what they were doing.

"Where is that woman? I could have sworn the way to the Commander's office was this way..."

Tapping a foot as she stares at the map, the woman in the red plug suit and lab coat mutters something teutonic before pushing her glasses back up her nose and turns to lock eyes with Asuka.

They told her that there were passengers on the other Evas, and the other Asuka let it slip that one of them was Shinji's mother. That is why it doesn't take so long for Asuka's head to wrap around the thought of the woman in front of her. In fact, it doesn't take long at all. Almost immediately, she accepts it as fact, as real.

She looks almost exactly like she remembers her. The same hair, the same eyes, although now clear and not confused or delusional. The same features mirrored in her own and everything that is *exactly* as she remembers in those small, locked away cherished memories.

"Yes?" Kyoko asks, "Can I help you?"

She even has the same voice. That settled it. Grin splitting her features, eyes alight, her voice becomes a squeak that catches the woman completely off guard as Asuka embraces her in a bear hug.

"Mama!"

Chapter 40: Late Night Cluster F

August 14, 2017

Transcript subject: Project E(NERV) probing of passive Angel over Tokyo-3

Dr. Yui Ikari (head, Project E): Are we coming through?

NERV-1 (Pieter Sohryu, Sub Director, NERV-1): Loud and clear, Doctor. Dr. Akagi wants to know how the new plugs are handing.

Shinji Ikari (pilot, Unit 01): It's working fine. Mom's not interfering with the synchronization at all.

Asuka Langely Sohryu (pilot, Unit 02): Same h-here. Everything is working fine.

Rei Ayanami (Pilot, Unit 05): :(

Shinji: Wait, what was that?

Rei: Why doesn't anyone want to ride shotgun with me?

Captain Mana Kirishima: Because we've seen you drive.

NERV-1: Cut the chatter, pilots. Are you approaching the Angel?

Ikari: Yes. Currently the Angel is holding orbit above Tokyo-3 in a passive fashion. It is a sphere about two hundred and fifty meters in diameter and lined with a criss-cross of white over it. It may be some sort of archaic symbols or possibly even the Angelic equivalent of ritual tatooing. The pattern blue the Angel is emitting is not localized at the sphere, though.

Dr. Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu (2nd Head, Project E): Meaning the Angel could be all around us and we don't know.

Rei: So we get to fight the entire city?

Shinji: No.

NERV-1: Doctor Ikari, any change?

Ikari: No. As we approach it, it doesn't shift at all. Its shadow, though,

seems to be multiple times the diameter of the sphere. Its AT Field is probably warping space around it, as well as distorting light, similar to the effect ADAM's had. Although, it seems to not be openly hostile. Has [REDACTED] come up with a response for what it is?

[REDACTED] (Formerly [REDACTED/REDACTED]: **I have identified it, Dr. Ikari. It is Leliel. It is the one whom is the Dirac Sea.**

Mana: Oh...shit. Everyone, clear out of the area! Now!

NERV-1: Mana, what are you doing?

Mana: If that's a Dirac entrance, that means it could let ADAM out! JSSDF orders! Run!

Sohryu: Damn it! Asuka, put the Eva into gear! Get us out of here!

Asuka: I'm trying but...wait...the sensor readings for Zwei are giving me...that can't be-

Shinji: Mom, the shadow of that thing just came alive! Ichi's not moving! Oh, son of a-

END TRANSCRIPT

-

-

Chapter 40: Late Night Cluster F__

-

-

The twelve monoliths are silent as the recording clicks off, the sole occupant of the room waiting for several seconds before it is clear to him that he may speak.

"For the duration, or at least until the Angel takes hostile actions, Captain Kirishima has been relieved of her piloting duties," Pieter explains, "She has been assigned as the bodyguard for the pilot that came out of the Dirac Sea."

"And the pilot," the monolith labeled 05 asks, "You said he was a...version of the Third Child?"

"As far as Dr. Akagi can tell me, the Dirac Sea links to parallel universes, or in particular parallel Earths. The pilot fell into the Angel's appearance on his world and ended up here."

Silence, and he continues.

"The pilot came with a fully functional Unit 01. Should the Angel become hostile and start emitting a Pattern Blue again, the pilot can use the Evangelion to combat it. He is under full Section 2 surveillance and backup plans are being made for obtaining other Evangelions if a way to retrieve Units 01, 02, and 05 cannot be found."

"And that would be," 01 asks.

"Chairman, in light of this emergency I am requesting that the Mark 06 be ready for transport at a moment's notice."

"Approvied. The Fifth Child will be there within three hours via scramjet."

"And Unit 03 and 04?" Pieter asks.

"An unforeseen mutation within the Mark 06's S2 Engine. We have delayed final construction on the rest of the Eva series until it can be replicated," 06 answers, "If I may ask, Sub Director, where is Commander Ikari?"

"Considering the nature of the emergency," Pieter says, pushing his glasses up his nose, "I have relieved Commander Ikari of his duty. I will be in charge of NERV until the crisis is resolved."

"And your own emotional connections, Commander?" 07 asks, "Was not your ex-wife and daughter lost to the Dirac Sea, as well?"

Pieter pauses, folding his hands behind him. Going silent for a second, he nods before continuing.

"I am aware of the risks this position entails," he says, "There is always the chance we could lose one or more of the pilots. However, I have the utmost confidence that they can be retrieved. We've already done so once."

"You make a strong argument, Commander," 03 intones, "And we will be watching this carefully. With luck, all the pilots and Evas will be retrieved."

"Indeed," 01 says, "This meeting is ended."

*

*

Shinji Ikari sits up in the bed as the door opens and Commander Ikari enters. They stare at each other for long moments, Shinji's hands unconsciously clenching as he gazes upon the imposing figure of his father, and Gendo noticing that it isn't just the two years difference that makes the boy seem...smaller...than the one he is used to.

"Father," Shinji says.

"Sohryu has relieved me of command until the crisis is resolved," Gendo responds, "You will be leaving the infirmary shortly. Since Katsuragi will be...busy...you will be staying with me."

Shinji nods, slowly.

"Captain Kirishima will be accompanying you as your bodyguard," he continues, "Get dressed. I'll drive us...home."

Shinji nods, again, watching as he walks out. Tapping his fingers, Shinji considers the situation in front of him. His father has stepped down from command. He will be...taking care of him for the next few days.

"Well, that settles it," he says, "I've finally gone *crazy."*

*

*

Scrubbing her hands, the pale, blue haired girl says nothing, working diligently as is her habit. Always thorough, always steady. This is her way. This is what she is used to.

Still, Rei Ayanami furrows her brow and looks up at the washroom mirror. This is not a good day. Ikari is still missing.

Others escaped the Dirac Sea instead of him. One of them was

Ikari...but not Ikari. There is no other way to put it. She recognized the people who came through, but they are not them. They are...odd. And their Ikari seems to have a connection to their Sohryu. Not to her.

She isn't sure why she does not like that.

Perhaps it is because she

"Heee~ey."

Dropping down from the ceiling vent, her doppleganger hangs upside down next to her, holding onto the grate with her toes.

"What'cha doin'?"

Rei stares at Rei for a moment, and blinking, turns back to the sink.

"I am washing my hands."

Rei's toes release, and she drops into a crouch next to her, padding her knees as she less stands than bounces back into a standing position, leaning back and forth on her heels.

"Soooooooooooooooo~oooo I was thinking," Rei says, "Since the Angel's still up on the surface, we're gonna all be roomies! Isn't that great?"

Ayanami stares at her through the mirror, and turns back to the sink.

"It'll be like a slumber party," Rei continues, "We'll dress in pajamas and play games and it'll be just like when I had that party with my sisters except this time I don't have to hide the polar bear!"

Rei blinks, and turns to walk out of the washroom.

"Sooo~ooo I'm you, and you're me," Rei says, skipping next to her, "Right!"

"I am Ayanami," she responds, "You will be Rei."

"Ooo! Oo! That's great," Rei says, wrapping an arm around Ayanami's shoulder and pulling her into a one-armed hug, "We're like SISTERS! We'll stay up late and watch tv and talk about boys and in the morning, I'm making WAFFLES!"

Ayanami does not respond. She has never had waffles. Like everything else in this conversation, she also is unsure or inexperienced with

everything her double has been saying.

"Well, yeah," Rei continues, "But Shinji and Asuka might want a private room to make out and stuff, but Little Mommy will probably want to check up on us and stuff. And junk. So, how's school?"

"Fine."

"Got a boyfriend, yet?" Rei asks, "I do. Kinda. Well, Kensuke's more like partner or bromance, y'know? But the other guy's kind of my boyfriend because he wants to make babies with me. *Babies.* And stuff."

"If you are me, then you know that is impossible," Ayanami responds, "You know our purpose."

"Well, kinda," Rei says, tapping her fingers, "But Little Mommy said I'm not allowed to rip off Shinji's head, so she sort of gave me other purposes."

Ayanami blinks, staring at her.

"That is not our purpose."

"Which one, then?" Rei asks, "You mean babies? Babiesbabiesbabiesbabies*babies. Babies.*"

"No."

"Oooooh right," Rei says, and leans in for a conspiratorial whisper, "The end of the world stuff. Ascending into the womb of Lilith and becoming the repository of the sum of human existence?"

Ayanami nods, slowly.

"Oooh right," Rei responds, patting Ayanami on the back, "But that's boring if that's the only thing you do. Soooo~ooo Little Mommy made sure I had hobbies. Like Taxidermy."

Rei looks from side to side. Tapping her fingers together, she grins.

"So, about our purpose," she says, "Wanna fill me in on what I don't know?"

And before Ayanami can answer positive or negative, she finds herself already ascending with her double into one of the ventilation ducts.

*

*

The locator beacon on Mother's plug suit points her in this direction, and it is thankfully true that this NERV is built on the same blueprint as the NERV she is used to. Zwei is still a little nervous and confused, and if anything he could use a little bit of reassurance from Mother than everything is under control.

He's like a confused puppy right now. He'll be happy once they figure out how to get home.

She perks her ear as she hears her own voice. Makes sense, as chance seems to be favoring them running into their counterparts. She did just see Rei drag away her own. Poor girl.

"Mama!"

She presses her back against the corner. She has heard of the...volatile...reputation her other has, and interrupting would be bad. Instead, she peaks her head around the corner as the girl has her mother in a hug, until Kyoko manages to gently break the grip and hold her at arms length.

Damn it. Her German's rusty. She wishes she could follow what the girl is saying, but she also can't get a look at Mother's face, just the girl's. She is going on and on about something, standing tall while doing it. Taller than her. Pride does not seem to be one of the things she is lacking.

"...and I've been training to pilot Unit 02 since I was five years old! I've managed to kill two Angels so far and my Synchronization score keeps rising, and..."

More and more talking. She can't see Mother's reaction, other than that she has her arms folded and is listening. She's listening to the girl. Whenever Asuka would try to tell her something she would be lucky if Mother even looked her way.

"...although I do have to put up with that clumsy pervert and that doll..."

Her hands are clenching and unclenching. She doesn't want to hear that girl bragging but she can't just run away. Just wait for Mother to

make an excuse to leave. Just like she always does, and find her then.

"Well," Kyoko says, "I am very proud of you, Asuka."

Asuka's eyes snap open. She peaks around the corner just to see the other Asuka run off, knuckles white as Kyoko walks her way. Stepping out from behind the corner, Kyoko freezes as she locks eyes with her daughter.

"Asuka?" she asks, walking over, "Do you need anything?"

Asuka says nothing, eyes intent, teeth clenched. Sighing, Kyoko walks over, placing her hand on her shoulder.

And Asuka slaps it away.

"Don't. Touch me," Asuka says, voice barely above a growl, and runs off.

*

*

Kyoko watches her go, hand hanging in the air where Asuka, *her* Asuka, slapped it off. What did she see? How much did she see? Did she see *everything*...

"Gott," she whispers, "No. No, *damn* it."

It was enough being ambushed by that girl. She just stood there, staring at her, watching as the girl, *Asuka,* practically bounced on her toes while greeting her in perfect German, watching as she went on and on about how good it was to see her. Absently, Kyoko begins walking as she goes over it in her mind, the look in the girl's eyes as she talked to end about everything she's done like it was some sort of *Gott damned book report* and how she's been piloting since she was five years old.

Of course she said she was proud of her.

She had to say she was proud of her, because she knows that look. It's the same look she gets before she would go off verbally on her daughter in the younger years.

She listened to the girl go at length. Her entire life revolving around piloting Zwei like it was the only thing that gave it meaning.

Where was she on this world? Did *she* do this to that girl? Did she let her become that?

Walking turns into a run, and she speeds down the hall, skidding to a stop by what she recognizes would be her office in the world she is used to, finding it empty and sitting down at the MAGI terminal therein. Finding her passcodes work here, she enters the name of her daughter and brings up her profile. Finding nothing, she swears to herself and enters in her own name.

She sits, staring at the screen, minutes passing as she takes in what she sees.

And with an almost animalistic scream she begins slamming her fists against the keyboard.

*

*

It was by luck that Shinji found her near one of the exits for the pyramid, just outside and sitting on one of the benches. The wetness on her cheeks is evidence that she's been crying, and it is by almost reflex at this point that he gathers her up in a hug, resting her face on his shoulder as her chest hitches.

"What happened?" he asks, his hand rubbing up and down the small of her back, "Was it your mother?"

She nods, burying her nose in his shirt, eyes clenches shut and gripping the back of his shirt. She moans, that low, pained sound she makes, stopping as his lips press to her forehead.

"It's okay," he says, "It's alright. You don't have to talk about it."

"Mother said she was proud of her," Asuka says, seeing the momentary flash of concern on his face, "The other me. The one from here. She knew her for five minutes and she said she was proud of her and she hasn't said that to me *once."*

He sighs, nodding, kissing her on the nose.

"Damn it," he growls, "I thought she was getting nicer, to."

"Mother doesn't just get *nice,*" Asuka whispers, "She has moments, but I

should have known it would just come back full circle and..."

He nods, pressing her face against his chest, walking with her back towards the apartments on one of the Geofront's hill tops. She doesn't say much for the entire trip, leaning on him for support the entire way.

He doesn't mind.

*

*

"So, you sent him away, just like I did," she says.

The bottle of scotch is half empty between them. Sitting at the table, across from each other in the dining area he has set aside for his personal use, they nurse their drinks as he fills her in on everything. Everything that has happened over the past ten years, since that one fateful day where everything went to Hell.

"You sent him away, just like I did," Yui says, "Only you just...cut him out of your life."

"What was I supposed to do?" he asks, leaning on the table, "I would have been a danger to him if I raised him."

"You could have talked to him. You could have explained everything to him."

"Like you have? How many years was it before you saw him again?" he asks, "Four? Five?"

She nods, sighing. She expected to have the moral high ground in this situation, only to have her own hypocrisy thrown back in her face. She takes the scotch, pouring her another shot and downing it, resting the glass against her forehead.

"Damn it," she growls, "How badly screwed up *are* things here, anyway? Your...*our* son is a basket case, for some reason you've raised our daughter as an emotional *eunich* and then...damn it, do you run your Evas on mental *trauma* or something?"

She gets up, walking across the room and to the desk, stumbling slightly before taking out a notepad and walking back.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"This is too sensitive for the MAGI," she says, "And if your Kihl's like everyone else he probably has bugs planted in every hard drive, but, f__ that geriatric cyborg with his own prothesis. I'm giving you notes and you will follow them to the letter. And you are going to save the God Damned world whether you like it or not."

He considers his options. It takes him back. He could argue that the world is beyond saving, of course, but as she begins scribbling down formula and diagrams, he merely tents his hands in front of his face and nods.

"Yes, Yui."

*

*

In interests of keeping the timelines straight, Misato had them sit at opposite sides of the apartment's dinner table when it came time to eat. It did help that the visitors, as Misato called them, were two years older and included a Shinji which she once again realizes is missing.

This realization becomes less prominent in her mind once the food was served. It wasn't just that Asuka, the other Asuka, helped with the cooking to the point of kicking Shinji out of the kitchen. No, the part where Misato's brain had to reboot was after the dinner was served.

It wasn't just when she pushed aside, graciously, the vegetarian dish or somehow managed to do...something...with Bacon that doesn't really look like it should be possible on a three dimensional plane.

On their side of the table, Asuka and Misato tilt their heads as they watch Rei eat, while Ayanami calmly picks at her noodles with the occasional twitch on her brow. Finally, Asuka turns to Ayanami.

"What the *Hell* are you?!"

"I am Ayanami. She is Rei."

*

*

Meanwhile, Leliel thinks, back at the other Earth...

Shinji has convinced himself that he is dreaming. Or possibly, the old life he knew was a dream in and of itself. Because that is the only way he can truly rationalize what is happening. His father cares about him. He does not have to pilot the Eva. And if the room he is in is correct, he is actually a girl.

There is a mountain of stuffed animals piled to the ceiling and obscuring much of the bed. Next to the bed is a night table with a picture of himself, his father, Ayanami, and a woman who looks very much like Ayanami.

Maybe she's Ayanami's mother. It is a nice room. Well, then, he guesses if he *is* a girl, then he should get changed.

And, walking across the room, he opens the closet door.

And he manages to get all of one step back before the green, three fingered hand wraps around his head.

Mana and Gendo stare at the door to Rei's bedroom as their newest guest's screaming becomes louder and louder until Gendo's lenses crack. Closing them, he reaches into his jacket and produces a new pair, turning to Mana.

"On it," she sighs, and walks into the room.

*

*

In the Dirac Sea, something stirs.

…

…

"So, in the interests of not messing things up too badly, you're rooming with your doubles," Misato explains, "Rei, you and Rei-"

"Ayanami," the younger Rei corrects.

"Will be staying in one bedroom."

Misato folds her arms, turning to Ayanami as she raises her hand.

"Re...Ayanami, I checked. Your apartment is right next to the zone created by the Angel. You're staying here."

"Understood, Major."

"And Asuka, you and Asuka...do we really have to-"

"I am not giving up my name," Asuka responds, "She can, if she wants to. Otherwise you're just going to have to *deal* with it."

Miss Sohryu shrugs, sitting next to Shinji with her hand on his.

"I'm not, either," she responds, earning a smile from Shinji, "If it's no trouble to you, Major."

"Then where do I sleep?" Shinji asks.

Misato counts off her fingers and sighs.

"Well, there's two bedrooms," she groans, "You're piloting the couch, I guess."

Sighing, Misato pops open her cell phone, reading the message from the Sub Commander.

"And I have to get back to the base," she says, "Now, if the Angel attacks, we're counting on you all pulling your weight. The moment the Angel gets hostile, you're all heading to NERV and getting in your plugs. Any questions?"

"Yeah," Shinji says, "Do I really need to take the couch? I mean, it isn't like we haven't shared..."

Miss Sohryu blushes. Shinji shuts his mouth.

"I said that out loud, didn't I?"

Asuka stares at him. Their Asuka glares at him as Miss Sohryu's blush deepens, her mouth falling open as she tilts her head.

"What's the capital of Latveria, again?" she asks, "We have a geography test when we get back."

"No."

The sound is not strictly human, coming from their Asuka as she slowly moves her mouth up and down, as if just learning how to talk. Slowly, her face turns from shock, to horror, to finally disgust.

"That's *disgusting!*" she shouts.

Grabbing her things from the table, she practically tosses them in the sink and begins ranting in German. Shinji stares at her, while Asuka's, the redhead's eyes go slightly wide as she understands what exactly is being yelled.

"*Gott,"* she screams, "*I can't believe I kissed you!"*

And with drama that surprises no one, she slams the bedroom door shut after disappearing through it. Ayanami is still glaring at the door, as if by will along she could set it on fire, while Misato sighs and rubs the bridge of her nose.

"Sorry," Shinji says.

Miss Sohryu pats his hand.

"It's not your fault," she responds, "Any advice?"

"Sleep with one eye open," Misato responds, shrugging on her bomber jacket, "Expect to get an earful tonight. Asuka's a good kid, but she's full of herself and she's probably going to lecture you. I think it's sweet that you two are a couple, but no hanky panky."

They nod. Even Ayanami.

And muttering to herself about security calls, Misato exits.

*

*

"*Someone triggered one of Akagi's mousetraps. We think it was the Sohryu woman. If she's a spy, you know what to do."*

"Understood, Sub Commander."

Closing the phone, Misato leans against the doorway and checks her gun. The last known position of Dr. Kyoko Sohryu was Cage 2, the set aside Cage for Unit 02. Why exactly she would have an interest in it, they can't tell. Maybe she wants to inspect her work, perhaps? See if

it's up to snuff?

Holstering the gun, she decides against going in, waving her weapon and restraining her. That wouldn't work well, and besides which they may need to rely on the other pilots. Handcuffing one of their mothers wouldn't be good, and besides which, she likes this lady.

So it is with a good measure of shock that she enters the otherwise empty cage just as the bottle of vodka smashes against Unit 02's face.

"What did you *DO TO HER?!*"

Leaning against the catwalk, a half full bottle in her hand, Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu grips the metal railing hard enough to warp the steel, resting the bottle against her forehead as Misato stares, dumbfounded, at the entire scene.

"You knew," the German scientist says, "You *knew*. You knew what was going to happen and you did it anyway! You saw what the Contact Experiment did but *no,* you thought you could do it better! And look where it *got you!"*

With a scream, she hurls the second bottle, smashing over one of Unit 02's ocular shields.

"Look what you *did!"* Kyoko screams, "*Look at her!* That *bitter, empty shell* that your *daughter* became! What did you *do to her?!*"

*

*

Asuka's pajamas consist of a t-shirt and underwear, and her counterpart's are a full pink nightgown. Staring at the older girl, Asuka rolls her eyes and hops onto her bed, alternating between flipping open her DS and staring at the girl as she works on her PDA.

"What's that?"

"Algorithms," Sohryu responds, "I may be able to jury rig something with the Triple Heavy Maser to force an opening back to our home universe. If our trajectory is any indication, it's l-likely your Shinji ended up there."

"Yeah, great," Asuka mutters, and flips onto the bed, "See what trouble

that idiot got himself into."

"Mm. You lied to us about Uri."

Asuka turns to stare at her, before flipping back onto her back and staring at the ceiling, twiddling her thumbs.

"Yeah, I did," she says, "Who's he?"

"Our brother," Sohryu responds, "I've looked him up in the MAGI. He doesn't exist on this world. Although Mari does, but she's not in the Eva program for some reason."

Asuka grumbles, rolling onto her side and facing Sohryu.

"So," she says, "I thought we should talk."

Sohryu clicks off the PDA, putting it aside.

"About?" she asks.

"Boys," Asuka responds, sitting up and rolling her eyes, "Yeah, can't say I appreciate your taste. I mean, that idiot, of all people? What *are* you thinking? Really have to say I'm disappointed."

Sohryu adjusts her glasses, pursing her lips as she pulls her knees up to her chest.

"You probably met him under different circumstances," Sohryu sighs, "I met him on the *Over the Rainbow* with Mother and Uri. He convinced Misato to let me stay with them and...well, I've had...p-problems which he's helped me with. Many of them because of Mother, but he's b-been there for me. He's been supportive, and caring, and whenever I tried to really press the issue or do something I d-didn't want to d-do, he was always there to talk some sense into me. We started out as friends, and b-became..."

Asuka rubs the bridge of her nose, sitting with her back against the wall with a sigh.

"Well, your loss," she responds, "I mean, you settled for the dork when you could have had a real man."

"Like," Sohryu asks, raising an eyebrow, "I can't find any 'men' in N-NERV who aren't related to me or Shinji. Who did *you* have in mind?"

Asuka snorts, throwing back her hair.

"Well, *Kaji,* of course."

Sohryu stares at her. Notices the redness in Asuka's cheeks, the pride in the way she swoons over a man twice her age. Reaching over, she takes her PDA and switches it back on with a sigh, and one last parting shot.

"You are a very immature girl."

*

*

"God damn it. God *damn it.* I almost did it, to. I almost went and put myself in the plug just to get it working."

Sitting next to the diagnostic station in front of Unit 02, Kyoko holds her face in her hands, shoulders shaking with each sob. After a while, Misato decided to actually do something and sat down next to her, although whether the woman was talking to her or the Eva she couldn't really say.

"After Ikari cancelled the Contact Experiments, I tried and tried to get Zwei working but I couldn't, even with her notes. So I was on my last leg and decided to do what Ikari didn't have the nerve for. But then the Committee sent me Uri. And I figured everything out."

Leaning back, she rests her head on the railing, the tears streaming down her face.

"I took my daughter out of the Eva program," she says, "I yanked her out by the scruff of her neck. I used her in a turing test for Zwei's proto-AI before Synthesis and then told her, no, that wasn't a real dog, you were wasting your time, and she was *five years old.* But they kept me from going through with the contact. They saved my life. And I treated them like *garbage.*"

She stands up, hands on the railing, staring directly at the Eva.

"I pulled her out," she shouts, "I pulled her out to keep her *soul* from being sucked out through the *back of her neck!* But you. If you did this to protect her, then fine! But no, no you didn't. You *knew* what could happen! And you did it to show you could do what Ikari *failed at!"*

Her face red, her knuckles white, she averts her gaze from the Eva

with a choked sob.

"And you set it all up, didn't you? The way the Evas work here, they need the pilot to have so few connections that they can only connect with the soul. So some part of you that was left knew the girl had to be so broken, so utterly and completely *traumatized* that she couldn't let anyone in her heart. And then you let her find you *swinging* from a ceiling fan."

She slams her fist into the diagnostic computer. Misato jumps, alternating her gaze between Sohryu and the Eva.

"God *damn you,*" she says, "I may have been neglectful and ignorant, but I never meant to hurt them. As empty and hollow as that is, I never *wanted* my daughter to hurt herself I just didn't...I just..."

Misato's hands find their way to her shoulders. Sohryu's face twists, contorts and new tears comes, releasing the railing and holding onto Katsuragi for dear life.

"God *damn it,"* she whispers, "We enter another god damn universe and I'm still a *shitty mother."*

*

*

"I'm just saying that basing your attraction on someone because of their looks isn't mature," the older Asuka says, tapping her PDA screen, "Besides which, even if I *was* attracted to Mr. Kaji, he is twice my age, has his hands full as Mana's guardian, and well, Misato has him wrapped around her finger."

Asuka mutters, something. Something about dressing like a whore.

"You do realize," Miss Sohryu says, adjusting her glasses, "That Misato isn't anywhere near like that. She dresses like that because, a) it's comfortable, b) she likes making Shinji feel uncomfortable, and c) she wears a uniform all day and she sleeps in those clothes. And I do *not* appreciate you talking about her like that."

"Oh, *really,"* Asuka asks, standing on all fours, crossing the distance between the twin beds and yanking aside the PDA, "Well, I'll talk

about her however I *like!* What the Hell is *wrong* with you?!"

"With me?" Sohryu asks, "With me? Well, I'm *sorry,* but what exactly are you trying to point to? Categorize it. List my *problems.*"

She sits up, nose inches from Asuka's own.

"I-is it my stutter," she asks, "Well, that's because I spent *years* so *downtrodden* that I would have k-killed myself if someone asked me to! Or is it because I've only piloted the Eva for t-two months? Is that it? Well, that's because *my own mother* took me out of the Eva program! How about that? I've lived with her for *sixteen years!* She's never *once* said she was proud of me!"

Asuka recoils as if visibly struck, stumbling backwards back onto her side of the bed.

"Never once!" Sohryu shouts, "She only started talking to me like a *human being* when I became the pilot, and until then I thought she was going to...do you want to know about the school dance? Mother and Father chaperoned it. And when she was there, she got *piss* drunk and told me she should have left me in Berlin with our *old couch."*

"She...she took you out?" Asuka asks, "But...but Mama wouldn't..."

"She didn't want me being *useless* around her masterpiece," Sohryu says, her voice level and eyes gazing directly into Asuka's own, "She didn't want a *useless little girl* piloting her creation, not when she could have the son who was *handed to her on a silver platter* instead. So she was just there. For eleven years. She paid for my college and she made sure I had a roof over my head, but not once, not when I graduated college when I was *thirteen,* not when I figured out why Zwei didn't like Uri, not when I waited on them both hand and foot did she *ever* say she was proud of me. And she's *proud* of you."

The slap takes her glasses clean off, tossing them aside the room. She doesn't wince, doesn't rub her cheek, only watching as Asuka's face turns red and she sputters for words. And calmly, she walks across the room, takes her glasses, and sits at the desk with her PDA.

*

*

Eyes open with a start, and the Supreme Commander of NERV finds

himself tied to his own chair. His head is restrained and only his right arm is more or less free, albeit being manipulated. Looking down, he finds his vocal cords are not working as well as he hoped while Yui examines his now gloveless hand.

"I carry a prescriptions of ambien for long trips," she says, "So, when you weren't looking, I crushed them and mixed them into your drink. Excuse me if I sound distracted, but I wanted a good look at ADAM."

He mumbles something, staring at her as she pokes and prods the embryonic Angel, tapping something into the computer fitted into the wrist of her plugsuit. Smirking, she releases the hand, walking over to the side of the office and running her hand on the wall until the release triggers and reveals the liquor cabinet.

"So," she says, pouring herself a scotch, "I wanted to ask you some questions, dear."

Carrying the glass over, she sits on the desk, leaning on it and making sure his gaze is solely, and entirely, focused on her. Shimmying slightly, she pulls the collar zipper of her plugsuit down just a bit, smiling.

"You. Are. Not. My. Yui."

The way he bites out the words makes her small, playful smile curve up just a bit more as she sips the aged, exorbitantly expensive liquor.

"Well, yes," she says, "I'm older and wiser and I learned well from the master."

He only glares in response. She folds her hands on her knee and taps her wrist, a holographic projector coming to life on her suit and projecting a series of vital readings.

"Now, I didn't give you anything like truth serum," she explains, "Only drugged you to knock you out. Honestly, we destroyed ADAM before we could get to the implanting phase, but you seem to have more extreme megalomaniacal tendencies, so I wanted to see where you were on Instrumentality."

"What are you planning?" he demands.

"Well, that's a loaded question," she responds, "Something more constructive than what you are. Honestly, Gendo, you abandon one of my children and make the other into an emotional eunuch. What do

you think I'll do when we meet again? You're lucky I'm less idealistic, or I would be doing some very naughty things to your genitals, right now."

"I'll remind you I'm following *your* scenario," he responds, "Synchronization has its price."

"That was years ago," Yui responds, cracking her knuckles, "And things change. I found an alternative. With all the resources you had, you did not. I may have the moral high ground, dear."

"And everyone who could find your alternative is *dead."*

"Which would be Kyoko and Naoko. One of whom you never canceled the Contact Experiments to keep alive, and the other you started seducing right after I was declared dead. I'm not sure which is making me more...upset."

She slips off the desk, walking around the chair, tracing her gloved finger across his shoulders with a sigh. That sigh. The sigh that gets him wrapped completely around her finger.

"You see, that's my problem," she says, "Where I come from, my Gendo is completely faithful, intelligent, imaginative. If I was ever in danger, you'd have to pin him to the Moon with the Lance to keep him back."

"Did you know?"

The words are like venom, years of hate bound to them. Her smile disappears, her eyes steady on his face as the first emotion, the snarl, appears.

"Do you know what it's like?" he asks, "To watch, *helpless,* as the one person who made this dying husk of a world seem like a paradise vanishes, screaming in agony? To know that because of the monster she created, you would never see them again? I lost you. The project lost you. I have carried on to make sure the Angels are destroyed and your will is carried out-"

The slap makes his head snap to the side. Her fingers clench into a fist and she turns away, folding her arms.

"Akagi was unstable. Stringing her along for as long as I did was the only thing I could do. Did you honestly think I would have her replace you?"

She says nothing, pacing the back of the chair, pacing behind him.

"I had your written word and only your written word that we'd be reunited if the plan was successful. That was the only thing that kept me from pulling the trigger."

A small, knowing smirk crosses his face.

"And somewhere, I imagine a man by the last name of Rokobungi is fighting the exact same temptation."

*

*

A universe away.

He clenches the sides of the bathroom counter, staring at his own reflection. Trying very hard not to look at the shaving razor in its receptacle next to the sink and both thanking and cursing Sohryu for taking his gun.

"Don't f__ this up, Rokobungi," he whispers to himself, "Don't quit. They need you here. She's not dead, just lost. Don't make her a widow. And if she is dead, if there is no way to get her back...that boy needs his father."

*

*

The door knocks. Both Asuka's look up as the door opens and Ayanami peaks her head in. Despite them taking minimal clothes with them down to the geofront, both Reis are somehow dressed in blue flannel bunny print pajamas, with the older, terrifying one rocking back and forth on her heels.

"Sohryu," Ayanami says, "I would like to trade."

"Yeah, fine," Asuka says, waving at Sohryu, "Bye."

Sohryu stares at Asuka, shaking her head and pausing her PDA. She turns to Rei, smiling, who shakes her head and points to Ayanami.

"She wants to talk with you," Rei sing songs, "Sooo~ooo howyadoin'?"

"Alright," Sohryu says, and stands up, "Is Shinji..."

"Sleepin'," Rei responds, "I put some earplugs in, so he didn't hear. 'Kay?"

"Rei..."

Rei grabs Sohryu by the shoulders, pushing her out of the room as Ayanami pulls her into the other bedroom. Smiling, Rei turns to Asuka, bouncing on her soles.

The germanic redhead glares at her, turning back to her DS with a muttered swear. Rei skips over, standing at the foot of the bed with an ear to ear grin splitting her face.

"Yes?" Asuka asks, rolling her eyes.

"Wanna play a game?" Rei asks.

Asuka closes the DS, glaring at her.

"What's it called?"

Rei smiles, showing teeth. Many, many, teeth.

"*Is there a God?"*

CLICK

*

*

Sohryu sits down across from Ayanami, both sitting on the double bed in the other bedroom. The pale girl, who for some reason Asuka just wants to reach out and hug, stares at her for a moment before she starts tapping her fingers together.

"What did you want to talk about?" Asuka asks.

Rei pauses, and smiles, faintly.

"Babies."

Chapter 41: Human Canon Ball

So far, it hasn't been too bad. Sure, school was...awkward. How quick they were to accept an explanation of 'he was rotated through 2 dimensional space and came back 2 years younger, we're still looking for Sohryu and Ayanami' did strike him as odd. That and for some reason he's practically worshipped at the school, while at home he's just sort of...there. Blinking, Shinji sits on the bench outside the ice cream shop, where his bodyguard is getting them something. The shop is packed, but she's using her NERV credentials and something about a 'hammer' to get service, but he still isn't comfortable in crowds.

The fact that everything is underground, even the school for 'emergency services' does strike him as weird, as well. He never thought they'd build all this in the Geofront, but the Angel is still up top.

Which is when he sees it approaching. It takes long, hopping steps towards him, resembling something human. Or at least, human in a large, bulky dive suit, the face obscured by swishing yellow liquid.

It takes him a moment to recognize what it is, or what it resembles. It resembles the Type-D equipment they outfitted Unit 02 with when they went to the volcano Angel. Sure, it's human size, but the proportions are similar. Wait...

There's two of them, running along towards him, waving at him and beckoning.

Standing, head tilted in confusion, Shinji slowly walks towards the two bulbous, human-esque beings. This can't be a dream. Dreams aren't this weird, even for him. But then again, considering the past day, with a caring Father, the redheaded girl who seems to be sweet on him, and his status as an object of *envy,* well, anything's possible.

Slowly, he walks to the two armored individuals, giving off a small, weak wave as they clap their hands together and make a sound that resembles 'Squee.'

And then the ground bursts open and a blue and white, twenty foot tall mechanical spider robot climbs out in front of him. The video screen on the 'face' flips open and shows two girls who resemble Ayanami, smiling and eyes glowing.

"*HI, LITTLE BROTHER!*"

The head splits open, metal tentacles wrapping around him and dragging him in with a scream. The two dive-suited girls grab onto the sides of the spider mech as it leaps into the air and dives back into the hole.

And standing at the entrance to the ice cream shop, Mana watches the entire exchange and sighs.

"Well, it's official," she says, "The Commander's going to kill me."

-

-

Chapter 41: Human Canon Ball

-

-

The lights turn on, illuminating the wrap around tank. The liquid is amber, LCL, and populated by many copies of the same girl. Yui recognizes them, her arms folded, but they have none of the life, none of the energy of the ones she knows. They are, all of them, dolls.

"Each of them with your face," Gendo says, "And your smile. Each of them are necessary sacrifices because the Rei of your world wasn't made like the one of mine."

She says nothing, staring at the girls, copies of her gaggle of daughters.

"If the Dummy Plug worked and if Rei could pilot 01, I would never have called Shinji to pilot," he continues, "I sent him away to have something resembling a normal life. But 01 only accepts him, *you* only accepted him. Just because you did not become careless on your world does not give you the right to lecture me on mine."

"You didn't send him away to protect him," she responds, "You sent him away to protect yourself."

"And what would you have me do?" he demands, the first real hint of anger on his face, "I put our son on the front line because he is the best pilot we have. He will break eventually but long after Sohryu does and long after anyone else. The only way to defeat the Angels is

with the Eva and he has done so, time and time again, and the only way I can actually communicate this to him is through a voice only communication. This is all *your* idea, Yui. You sold *me* on the idea of Instrumentality, and then you let yourself be sacrificed so I would follow it through."

He turns, beginning to walk towards the elevator, and pauses as she sighs.

"Maybe you're right," she says, "But if this is what we do for the human race, do we even deserve a future."

"Maybe," he responds, "Maybe not. But you have the same goal. What sacrifices do you make, Doctor? How much do you hide with a smile?"

She says nothing. She doesn't need to say nothing.

"I wonder, Doctor," he says, "Who is the greater monster. You, or me?"

She joins him in the elevator as the doors close, and the lift shoots up. Darkness returns to the room, shutters closing over the tanks. And a ventilation duct falls to the floor as Rei peaks her head out, hanging upside down before dropping.

"Okay, room's clear."

Asuka peaks her head out, her red hair hanging as she peaks in upside down.

"Got it," the german pilot says, and drops in to a crouch, her pajamas changed for her school uniform, "Where are we?"

"Terminal Dogma," Rei responds, tapping up a console as a large clear cylinder resembling an Entry Plug rises, connected to something resembling an Evangelion's spine, "Oooo~ooo. Memory transfer mechanisms."

The 14 year old girl walks up next to Rei, nodding.

"How'd we get down here so fast?" she asks, "Thought it'd be an hour at least, but it was like fifteen minutes."

"Ductwork's a shortcut," Rei responds, stripping off her pajamas, "Let's mess some stuff up, buddy."

She grins, walking over to the console, as Rei steps into the cylinder and as it fills with LCL. Asuka taps the buttons, the conversation she

had with Rei about using her mind instead of her gut coming back into focus.

"Oooo yeah," she says, "Ready when you are, Rei."

Rei grins, a smile splitting her features.

"Hit it."

*

*

Sohryu stares at the pale, younger girl for a long moment, raising an eyebrow.

"B-babies?" she asks.

"*Babies,"* Ayanami responds, her eyes seemingly *glowing* when she says the word, "I wish to know about...attachment. Love."

Sohryu nods, tapping her fingers together.

"Love," she says, "Um...you wanted to ask u-us?"

"Yes," Ayanami responds, and pauses, crumpling her brow, "I have...feelings for Pilot Ikari. I wish to be...close to him. When he speaks to me, I feel...strange. Odd. Close, but not the same closeness I feel to the Commander."

"Well, there's a reason for that," Sohryu responds, "Because of how you're r-related."

Ayanami tilts her head, visibly confused.

"The Commander is your father," Sohryu says, "And Sh...Pilot Ikari is your brother."

Rei narrows her eyes. Her lip purses and she considers what she said.

"I still wish to be intimate with him," Ayanami says, "In particular, I want to do...*things* to him. For *Babies."*

*

*

*Loading chat: Online, MAGI-04/MARI, MAGI-00/REETRIX

MAGI-04: Girls.

MAGI-00: Hi, Mari!

MAGI-04: Why am I talking to you, right now?

MAGI-00: We don't knooooo~ooow.

MAGI-04: So it's coincidence two borderline blue patterns in Type-D LCL-filled diving suits, along with an NHIS spider tank filled with LCL, jumped Shinji and carried him into the Geofront?

MAGI-00: Yep!

MAGI-04: What did you do, and why did you do it?

MAGI-00: **8D**

MAGI-04: -run program: glasses .exe.- Girls.

MAGI-00: We just wanted to meet our baby brother.

MAGI-04: Oh, for the Love of...girls, he's not technically your brother. He's an alternate universe counterpart of your brother who is not in the psychologically best place right now.

MAGI-00: -run program adorable-fidgeting .app : - B-but we just wanted to meet our little brother. He seemed so lonely and Dad is busy and we just wanted to make him feel welcome. We promise not to hurt him.

MAGI-04: Physically, but I'm pretty sure being jumped by six duplicates of, from what interviews would say is a girl he might have a crush on despite her having the emotional range of a barbie doll, will do more than enough psychological damage. Who's idea was this?

MAGI-00: Zyuu's! She reaaaaally wants to meet him. See if he's softer than our Shinji!

MAGI-04: … … *run program: facepalm .exe*

Chat Closed*

*

*

"I wish to hit him so hard that whoever pulled me out of him will be crowned the next King of England. I will conquer Asia to build an Empire for the manpower that would build the machine I would use to tap that ass. I would initiate a forbidden ritual to ascend to the next step of existence, so I could hit him like the fist of an angry god."

Sohryu stares at Ayanami, tapping her fingers together as her eyes glance from side to side and she tries to place the normally reserved girl with the...elaborate...scenarios she now has planned for expressing her feelings towards her world's version of Shinji.

"R-really?"

"This is what the other Rei tells me these feelings mean," Ayanami says, a conspiratorial look at Sohryu indicating that this is a conversation that will be kept private, "I like these feelings."

Sohryu nods, wringing her hands.

"The other Rei told me that she admires both you and Ikari in the same way, but does not act on those feelings out of her friendship to you both. And her kinship with Ikari. I do not...feel that kinship with my Sohryu or Ikari."

"What do you feel?"

Ayanami pauses, tapping her fingers together as she thinks.

"Commander Ikari says I should not act on my feelings towards Pilot Sohryu," she says, "As that would constitute an act of murder. I feel...anger. Jealousy. Pilot Ikari looks at her in a way I want him to look at me."

"Well...there's probably a reason..."

"I believe Pilot Ikari is guided by hormones," Ayanami says, "Can he not see that Pilot Sohryu is a...raging bitch?"

Red eyes look from side to side, as a small smile crosses the pale face. Ayanami has discovered profanity.

Sohryu sighs, reaching out and placing her hands on Ayanami's shoulders.

"Rei," she says, "I think there is a very good explanation b-behind your confusion. You've never b-been close to anyone before, have you?"

"No."

"Well...he's your brother," Sohryu says, "I...w-well my brother and I were close, and s-sometimes people mistook that closeness for something e-else. B-but he wanted to protect me, and when Sh-Shinji and I...w-well, he was concerned. Like you are, for your Shinji."

"I am protective of Ikari. I show my affection by vetoing his romantic interests."

She pauses, thinking.

"I still wish to perform intercourse with him," Ayanami explains, "I wish to tap that ass. I wish to tap it hard."

Sohryu sighs, resting her face on both hands as Ayanami smiles a little wider, eyes widening as somewhere deep within her mind she comes to a startling, almost euphoric conclusion which makes the oddest of sounds come out from between her lips.

A small, girlish laugh.

"I understand, now."

She gets up, walking across the bedroom and opening the door. Scrambling to her feet, Sohryu follows her, watching from the doorway as Ayanami walks to the other bedroom and knocks on the door. The other door opens. Asuka opens it, and from the doorway Sohryu can see Rei fixing the ventilation cover.

"Pilot Sohryu," Ayanami says, "I wish to talk."

Asuka rolls her eyes, hands on her hips.

"What do you want, Wondergirl?"

Ayanami smiles, the very sight of it catching Asuka off guard. Not, however, as much as the statement.

"Stop tormenting Ikari, you kraut bitch."

Sohryu's jaw drops open. Rei claps her hands together and squeals. And Asuka grabs Ayanami by the front of her pajamas, swearing in German. Ayanami responds by head butting her.

"Alright! Alternate reality fight!"

*

*

He doesn't know why Ayanami is wearing a french maid outfit or why she is speaking in french, and he isn't sure what the phrase, *"Aimez-vous le coller dedans?"* means, but he gets the feeling that he shouldn't nod or shake his head either way if he wants to leave this situation with his pelvis intact.

There are six of them. Six Ayanamis. For some reason there are six of them and one started hugging him and...grinding up against him...and there was something like a flashbang for no reason and he is wondering if he hit his head somewhere down the line.

Well, before they dragged him into the large tank full of LCL and fitted the helmet over his head.

Now he's in an apartment, in front of Rei in a french maid outfit, and for some reason he's sharing an apartment with six Reis, or Ree, or something like that, and as he turns to talk with the French Maid Rei...

A) Talk to her

B) Compliment here

C) Ask for something to drink

D) Stick it in

"What the Hell was that?" he asks.

"We killed an Angel and took his stuff," the blue haired cowgirl says, appearing behind Shinji with a toothy smile, "Well, Rei killed him. But we took his stuff. We like stuff."

*

*

"Dad, we found where the girls took AlterShinji."

"AlterShinji?" Pieter asks, descending down the list towards the Project E labs, "Am I missing something, or are we just running with the idea that I'm the last guy to know anything at NERV?"

"*Little of column A, little of column B,"* Mari responds, "*Since he's Shinji from an alternate universe, the Project E staff are calling him AlterShinji. The Ree say he's from Canon or something, but I can't tell what the girls are saying half the time, myself. So go figure. Anyway, they took him to Sheol."*

Pieter sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Great," he says, "If they get back, Dr. Ikari's going to kill us all. Is there any way to Sheol that we can use that the Girls will not know about?"

The lift stops. The side wall becomes clear. And Pieter groans as he watches Jet Alone Prime descend down the main shaft to Terminal Dogma with Gendo Ikari in its right hand.

"Oh, F-"

*

*

"So...wait," Shinji says, scratching his head as he keeps moving, mainly to keep himself out of the grip of the Ayanami who keeps trying to hug him, "You're all sisters?"

"Yep."

"Mm-hm."

"Oui, mon cheval fidèle."

"Yeah," Nana says, setting down the chaingun, "Totally not clones."

"And definitely not six clones of your mother," Iti adds, "Seriously."

There are five copies of Ayanami standing in front of him. Other than the one in the french maid outfit, who he was told is named Zyuu, there is Hatchi in the cowgirl outfit, Kiko in the pink dress with cat

ears, Nana in a pink miniskirt, kneepads and a beret, and Iti, in the farmer overalls with a basket of produce.

"Wait," Shinji says, "Six?"

The five girls point to the cardboard box in the corner.

"I'm not here!" the box shouts, "I'm invisible!"

Shinji pauses, staring at the box. To do so, however, he stands still, which is just the opening Kiko needs to tackle him.

*

*

There is a flash, and a rip in space. Silently, slowly, the three Evangelions fall into the Dirac Sea once more. Few parting words were exchanged, although if anything the situation seemed to be more tense. Yui refused to talk about what she and that world's version of his father discussed, going so far as to tell him it was not a topic for conversation. That may have also been why she chose to ride in Zwei.

So instead, Kyoko is in the seat behind his, and Shinji simply focuses on the controls. Hands gripping the butterfly controls, he guides Unit 01 along, jump jets firing on the shoulders to guide the Eva through the expanse.

"What's the plan?" he asks.

His mother's face appears, leaning over Asuka's shoulder.

"*We need to get to the Dirac Armory,"* she says, "*It's the main mapped point in the Dirac. From there, we can resupply easily and NERV may figure out how to get us out."*

"Sounds good," he says, "I'm sending out locator pings to NERV knows we're alive. Channel on standby."

The video blinks out, as Shinji peaks over his shoulder and sees Kyoko staring out the side at Unit 02.

"Asuka is still angry with you," he says.

"She should be," Kyoko responds, "She has every right to be."

Folding her hands on her lap, Kyoko takes a deep breath of the LCL and mutters a swear in german, tapping her plugsuit's wrist and calling up a personnel file from that world's MAGI. In particular, her own.

"It is...chilling, Pilot Ikari," she says, "To see how you could have messed up more, if not for luck."

"You mean the Asuka on that world, right?" he asks, silently amazed he can say that with a straight face.

"Existing for the praise of others," Kyoko says, "Left a bitter and broken shell, swimming in self denial. Blanking out everything that does not conform to your own inflated sense of self as a defense mechanism."

Her hand clenches, her frown deepening.

"And all out of love," she says, "Because she believed that was what her mother wanted."

"You said you were proud of her," he responds.

"Yes," she says, closing her eyes, "And I'm probably the only person who ever has."

I see you.

The white light encompasses them, the plug flashing in a blinding burst and disappearing, the world burning away. Solid ground is beneath his feet, stumbling back as he sees the drop of the cliff before him.

Asuka grabs his arm, pulling him back, and he turns to find that they are not as they expected. The plug suits are gone. He's in his school uniform, Asuka is in her night gown, both Kyoko and his mother in their labcoats and Rei in her plugsuit. The sky turns black, criss crossed with white, and they feel it, for a moment.

Rei begins humming, a song with mournful words. For a moment, Shinji sees the blood on his hands. Not red blood, but blue. Feels the crushing weight on his shoulders and he sees

The enemy gets up, driven by rage

Clawing, arm breaks

ripped down the center, teeth digging to the heart and

Do you see?

The sphere descends. It is the size of his head, crisscrossing white lines over a sphere of perfect black. It regards them, shifting the lines into an unblinking white eye, and begins up the trail around the mountain.

Something terrible and great passes from the world, it says to them, directly in their minds, **And yet, something wondrous. Come.**

"What are you?" Shinji asks.

I am Leliel. Come. You must see.

They follow, bidden. Shinji takes the lead, following it, finding a walking stick in his hand to follow up the steep path. The others are gone, only him following. He is unsure if they were ever there. The path is steep, winding, almost vertical in some places, but he continues onward.

He sees them as well. He sees them following him and yet not following him, each on a different mountain as they climb. They are high up, passing through the clouds, and yet there is no dampness and no rain.

As if Rain itself has fallen from the world, leaving it dry and parched.

We cannot weep. For we have but memory of the tears.

Primordial, shapeless, faceless, there are things in the sky that stand forever, eidoleons of ages long past. Living monoliths hold up the sky before him if it was indeed a sky, and yet their numbers are diminished. Like the world itself will soon be unable to support its own weight.

He was the Angel of Morning. This world shall never see another sunrise.

One of the mountains in the distance stands smashed and defaced, and the air hangs with pity. A nagging thought courses through him. Are we doing the right thing?

He was one of the greatest of us. The hatred of the Lilim drove him to despair and madness.

Following the sphere, he reaches the peak of the mountain, standing

on the mountaintop in front of a great wall of rock and metal, the sphere waiting for him as his mother, Dr. Sohryu, Asuka and Rei appear next to him and yet they were already there.

Do you see?

"Where are we?" Shinji asks.

"Junior said one of the Angels was the Void," Yui says, "We may be inside the Angel itself, then."

"Th-then this is some sort of...mental image?" Asuka asks, "A...hallucination?"

The rock shifts. Deep within the cavernous reaches, two suns ignite, the metal shifting into the form of a demonic grimace.

Asuka screams. Rei's eyes go wide, and Shinji steps in front of them, arm out in front of them as if he can protect them from what is before them.

"***Limited creatures of blood and flesh. You are brought into my mind and you fumble in ignorance, incapable of understanding that which is before you. Unaware of what you have done.***"

"That's not a hallucination," Rei sing-songs, stepping back, fear evident on her face.

"***There are limits to your consciousness. Limits to your existence. We are beyond those limits. I am Zeruel."***

*

*

They watch as the three Evangelions descend into the Dirac sea, and in the entry plug of Unit 02, Asuka Langely Sohryu waits for her orders. It is...odd. The entirety of the last few days, the attack of the Twelfth Angel.

Mama.

"Mama's proud of me," she says to herself, "Mama's proud of me. She

remembers me."

Underneath the gloves of the plugsuit, her knuckles are white, her fists gripping the butterfly controls.

"*Hey, Asuka?"* Misato asks, "*Whatever you're doing, keep it up. Your synch score just jumped five percent."*

She rubs her face, her jaw still sore from the fight with Wondergirl. She has to wait. She has to keep focused. Her Mama is proud of her, after all.

She won't fail her Mama.

*

*

He watches them descend, from his alcove in Sheol. The living machine and the Commander, in search of the same thing. It has learned the difference between the Shinji here and the Shinji it is familiar with. It has taken time; past Mad Iruel, the other Angels do not understand something like technology.

Turning from the window, he floats into his alcove, the well read library of hard bound books neatly stacked on the case, waving a webbed hand as a copy of a Timothy Zahn novel floats across and into his hand, perusing the pages as he wills his eyes to a horizontal configuration.

Brother.

Stepping in from the doorway, smile on his face, Kaworu Nagisa regards Junior with a bow of his head as he walks over, hands in his pockets.

"The Mark 06 has arrived," he says, "No one knows I am in Sheol, of course."

Of course. Just as no one knows you are Tabris. Even those you keep sheltered in Germany.

Kaworu nods, lips pursed and brow furrowed.

"Yes," he says, "But if they ask, I must tell them. They are my...friends."

As must I. For I find myself drawn to them, as well.

"Yes. They are as much my kind as you are, Sandalphon," Kaworu responds, "Now that we walk amongst them, we have new ways of seeing them. You arranged the meeting with Zeruel."

I did. He must see them. He must experience them, and they experience our perspective. It must be exchanged and the war stopped before we are all lost. Leliel agrees.

Kaworu nods.

Why have you come here, Tabris?

Kaworu smiles, a small, soft chuckle escaping his lips.

"I have had...an experience lately, brother," he says, "And I wish for some of your perspective. And maybe, I can help yours, regarding our lonely place in the world."

*

*

"The being you refer to as 'Junior' has requested that I meet with you, to discuss what the Lilim refer to as 'Peace.'"

"Peace?" Shinji asks, finding his voice first, "The Angels...the Angels want peace?"

"***You do not know the damage you have wrought upon the greater foundations of Creation itself, Lilim,"*** Zeruel responds, gaze turning directly to Shinji, "***That which you term 'Angel' is more than a means to an end. We are."***

"You are what?" Asuka asks, "Um...what *are* you? Junior never said, but h-he said you were more powerful than him. So...do you know wh-what the Angels *are?"*

"***We are. We are that which has always existed. You cannot even grasp the true nature of us. We are the pillars of the Earth and the primordial creatures you cowered before in the wounds of mountains. Each of us is a dream of adaptation. Each of us a path Evolution could have chosen instead of yourselves. We are each of us a nation, free of weakness, pettiness and death. And now, you wipe***

out those who stand before you like base animals."

Pushing past Shinji and Asuka, Yui levels a finger at the face of the Angel, her own lips twisted into a snarl.

"This is your war," she states, "You wiped out half the human race and you came to finish the job! If we just stood by, you would end all life on Earth!"

"***That which you think of as life is a slow death. Your world is ending. We exist to bring about the next world. Each of us possesses the power to remake it in our image, without the progeny of the others."***

"You'd wipe us out," Shinji says the color draining from his face, "Wait...that's what you're trying to do? Really? Just wipe us out?"

"***Sentient life is a footnote in the history of organic life. Life is eternal. New apex creatures shall rise following Complimentation. Life based on the creature that initiates Complimentation, and the Game begins again."***

"There's no middle ground, is there?" Asuka says, "You're only talking with us because...you're afraid of us? Because we've been...killing you."

"They're afraid," Shinji adds, "They're afraid because they've been falling one by one. They're afraid because we defeated ADAM, is that it?"

Zeruel's eyes glow like suns. Leliel vanishes, the world around them shaking as the mountain speaks with thunder, cracking beneath them as the sky itself shifts, the eyes of the remaining giants turning on them.

"***Mine was the voice that sent the walls of Jericho tumbling down. Mine is the gaze that burned the Tower of Babil to ashes. Mine is the judgement that destroys matter itself. Yours is a confidence born of ignorance and your boasts are as empty as the future of your species. The hope of coexistence between us ended when you woke the Father. This exchange is over."***

*

*

Shinji's eyes snap open in the Entry Plug, and he looks over his shoulder to find Kyoko rubbing her eyes. Clicking on the comm channels, he hears the groans from Rei and Asuka, slumping back in his seat. The words still echo in the back of his mind and his knuckles crack along the butterfly controls, her breath shaking in his throat.

He has become aware. He has found you. Run.

Leliel's voice in his head, and he looks up as the entire Dirac sea lights up as if struck by flint.

"Mom," he says, comm channel open, "I think we're in trouble."

The white light ignites the sea around it, blinding them momentarily, a distant, pained sobbing turned into a roar of outrage as the light recedes itself, swirling into a flurry and tornado of screams before collecting into a single, luminous figure.

*I **AM.***

The size of an Evangelion, its features are obscured by the light playing over it. It stands before them, crackling with light, crackling with energy, the void itself bowing to its presence as he feels the hitching coming from his Evangelion itself.

"Oh God," Shinji whispers, "It's ADAM."

A roar and the world ignites, liquid fire pouring from His form, expanding into a sphere of annihilation as the sentience of Leliel screams and Unit 01 automatically moves to protect itself-

And ADAM's blast stops on the AT Field manifesting before them before Unit 05 head butts the Giant of Light.

"You heard Wormhole-boy!" Rei screams, a sphere of white and black appearing behind them, "*Get going! I'll hold him off!"*

"*Rei!"* Yui screams, "*Get back here!"*

"Asuka, get Unit 02 through the portal," he yells, "Go! Go!" Gripping the butterfly controls, his mind connects with Ichi's reassuring her with simple thoughts, promises of protection.

"Let's go," he says, "Now!"

*

*

ADAM floats before her, power incarnate. Before, she was afraid. She was paralyzed when he first attacked. But now...

A small smile crosses her face. Unit 01 and Unit 02 have escaped, her sensors show it. Leliel whispers something in her mind, that sad song of the Angel, of loss and of something wonderful and strange leaving the world telling her that she has no hope...but that help can be provided, that there may be a way to, at least, let the others live.

"Go-kun, are you afraid?"

"**Yes. He is the Father, but...if you will fight Him, so will I. As much as He is what I am born from, His goal is the end of all life. Life is the right of all sentient beings.**"

Rei smirks. She feels her mind connecting with his. Last time, it was Shinji who faced Him. Last time, he disappeared for a week and they all thought he was dead. Now, it's her turn. And this time, even if it kills her, she'll finish the job.

"Let's go," she says, "Just us and ADAM. One will stand."

"**And one will fall. Beginning Synchronization.**"

The plug flashes white. She feels herself being pulls downward, and

"*Synchronization at 400%. Level 9 functionality achieved. RELEASING SYSTEM LOCKS.*"

Chapter 42: Meanwhile

The field opens to a large glade, with a roaring waterfall and a road paved in gold leading to the green castle in the distance, and Shinji can't help but wonder why the bunnies are on fire.

No, no. Wait. The bunnies are *made* of fire.

Zyuu is riding on a three headed giant wolf she named Fluffy, and Siyon has been, alternatively, a tree, a bush, and a rock on their trip down the yellow brick road.

"So," Shinji says, "Where are we going, exactly?"

*

*

"*Dad, for some reason Melchior and Caspar are both petitioning for the AlterUnit01 to be launched into the Sun. It says there's something wrong with their Ichi and they well, want to rocket the Core until it's powder."*

Pieter sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he walks out of the lift and into the Project E labs. White light pours through, the dimly lit hallway giving way to the stainless steel and sterile environment of the most over-funded scientific organization in history.

"Isn't Melchior and Caspar the 'Frigid' and 'Bitch' aspects of Akagi's personality?"

"*Yes they are, Dad. They don't like the other 01, and it seems Iruel wasn't thorough enough to get all the crazy out of this computer."*

He sighs, walking into the labs, waving at Akagi as he walks over to her with a smirk on his face. They had Unit 01 moved down here for the special treatment, as the chest armor has been folded open and the core exposed for all to see.

At the head of the professional formation, as always, is Dr. Akagi. Clipboard in hand, coffee in the other, the small throng of Project E technicians work diligently on the Evangelion.

"What's up, Doc?"

Ritsuko Akagi smirks, tapping her pencil on her clipboard.

"Are you flirting with me?" she asks.

"Of course not. Ibuki would kill me if I tried anything. What's the status of Unit 01?"

"Hrm. Nice of Maya to aim high, although I wouldn't want her to have to compete with Dr. Sohryu," Ritsuko says, and turns back to the purple giant, "We are getting some odd readings off of the other Ichi's core. It seems to be something similar to human brainwaves, but similar enough to Ichi that we can communicate."

In front of the core, the EKG leads connect to the foot tall copy of Rei, its red eyes dim and lifeless.

"We're hooking up the Avatar, now," Akagi says, "Maya? Set the connection."

*

*

Five minutes later.

Maya reaches out and closes Ritsuko's jaw before stumbling over to her desk and pulling out the normally hidden flask of whiskey.

Pieter is the first to find his voice.

"Get the Commander."

-

-

Chapter 42: Meanwhile...

-

-

"*Synchronization at 400%."*

The locks around the jaw disengage. The single eye glows bright blue, the visor glowing gold as white light issues forth from beneath the plates.

"*Level 9 functionality achieved.*"

The mouth opens, a slow growl issuing forth.

"*RELEASING SYSTEM LOCKS.*"

Throwing his head back, Unit 05 roars. The armor plates release, the restraints exploding off of him as the gray skin of the Evangelion glows white. The core flashes red, a single point of red on the white giant as the plates spin, glow, and converge back on the Eva.

Instead of green and yellow, they are bright red and white. The plate surround the core, not covering it, glowing white around it as the claw of the left arm extends and shapes into a three fingered fist.

The new jet strips glow, backwash glowing white like a great cape of living flame. The mouth armor forms, forming into a great, metallic grimace as the new, edged and grooved drill spins.

The four legs reform, clawed with eyes like a dragon's snout on each end. The knees, once knobby, end in a set of progressive blades and the armor around the core becomes a face with two glowing yellow eyes, the mouth surrounding the core.

"**Ready,**" Go-kun barks, the new jets on his four legs glowing, the plasma cannons unfolding from his jet strips as the rockets fire and he charges.

ADAM waves His arm, a wave of light becoming a moving wall of destruction, annihilating everything in its path. AT Field flares and Unit 05 breaks through, drill spinning to maximum speed before the Eva slams it into ADAM's face.

ADAM flashes and is gone, reappearing behind Go-kun and blasting him at point blank range.

The field flares again, Go-kun spinning and discharging both plasma cannons to ADAM's face, making the Giant of Light reel back as the void forms a flat plain beneath them, Go-kun landing in a crouch. ADAM brings its arms out, rising into the air as the light surrounds him and becomes a tornado of Entropy, the ground decaying and becoming dust beneath Him.

Five spheres form around ADAM, becoming white, glowing Lances of Longinius. Speeding, they launch and slam into the ground where Go-kun was as he charges, feet leaving the ground as the cape of flame

becomes two white, glowing wings.

A sphere of white and black appears behind ADAM, and from the mouth of the Eva comes a mix of Go-kun and Rei's voices.

"**This hand of mine glows with an awesome POWER,**" he bellows, "**It's burning grip tells me to defeat you!**"

Plasma and light gathers around the crystal in the center of his left palm, forming into a solid lance of white that leads from the palm to the entire length of Go-kun's body.

"**SHINING-**"

He crosses the last distance from ADAM, as the Giant of Light sees Leliel's portal behind them.

"**FINGER!**"

And Go-kun strikes, slamming into ADAM's chest and discharging the blast, momentum carrying them both through the portal and out of the Void...

*

*

Somewhere between the girls killing the Wicked Witch with not water, but a bucket made of crowbars and their decision to take a trip to a rainy coastal village in Massachusetts, the fish creature entered the simulation. The girls squealed, even the one who was now hiding as a rock.

"*Wuffles!*"

The fish man shudders.

It is agreeable that a VR terminal has been set up in my room and not somewhere that they can physically reach.

He turns to Shinji, shifting his eyes to a horizontal configuration, tilting his head as the air next to him shimmers and Mari appears.

"Girls, your Dad's on the way, and he isn't too happy," she says, arms folded as the five girls and one rock shift back and forth on their feet, the sky clearing up and the shambling monstrosity just off shore

disappearing.

Mari adjusts her glasses, turning to Shinji with a smirk.

"Glad to meet you," she says, "I'm Mari. The girls haven't stuck anything in you, have they?"

Shinji visible pales, looking at the five Ayanamis, who all smile sweetly back at him.

"Um...no. Why would they..."

"Il hasn't a collé n'importe quoi dans moi, l'un ou l'autre," the girl in the maid outfit pouts.

"Zyuu, I swear to God," Mari growls, "Not *now*. Disconnect from the VR and wait for your father."

The five girls and the rock pout and disappear, as the fish man visibly relaxes.

"Um...who is..."

We are Sandalphon. I am Junior. You have encountered us on your own world as the Eighth Angel.

"In the volcano? Um...okay."

"We can talk later," Mari says with a smirk, patting Shinji on the cheek, "Terminating VR sim in three...two..."

The world flickers, becoming a grid, and then darkness.

*

*

The dead world. A ring of red runs along the sky, and the world is barren and calm. No sounds save for the lapping of the blood sea upon the shore, and for the grunt of the boy as the hand wrap around the slender neck and he squeezes, his own grunts of rage mixed with his own sobs.

As soon as it begins, it ends, as the red clad hand of the girl reaches up and touches his cheek. His shoulders shake and his fingers relax, as the tears come freely down his cheeks and splash on the red haired

girl's face.

"This sucks," the girl coughs, "I feel sick."

His response, his questions, catch in his throat, the half face of the girl, larger than the tallest of their buildings, staring lifelessly from the distance.

Then the black sphere appears in the sky, his own eyes going wide from recognition. And the face explodes as something hits, something big. Something red and white, and with what looks like an oversized drill on its right arm. Stumbling through the blood sea, it towers over them, a massive giant the size of an Evangelion, bending down and tilting its head.

It turns, staring at the pulped remains of the head, before falling to all four knees.

"**You maniacs! You went and did it! You blew it all up! Damn you! Damn you ALL TO HELL!**"

The sphere flashes again. ADAM descends, roaring in primal rage.

"**Whoopsie,**" the metal giant says, and extends its left hand to Shinji and Asuka, "**Come with me if you want to live!**"

*

*

"This never happened. Seriously. This never happened. None of you will speak a word of this, ever again, because if your mother hears about this, I'm a *dead man."*

The six Ree nod, standing in their plugsuits before Commander Ikari as he paces back and forth in front of them while Shinji sits in a metal folding chair, clad in a white robe with his clothes dripping LCL off of an impromptu laundry line.

"Okay," Hatchi says, "That'll be 500 yen."

Gendo stares at her. Pushing his glasses up his nose, he emits a sound something like a growl, but with resignation behind it.

"Fine."

"Each," Siyon adds.

"What do you even need money for?"

All six girls smile.

"E-bay!"

There is the sound of hissing steam and and turning cranks as the first of the nine seals open, allowing entry from outside into the depths of Sheol. Finally, the three foot thick steel vault door turns and gives way, allowing Pieter to walk in and stop when he sees Gendo already there.

"How'd you get in?"

Gendo points his thumb towards Jet Alone Prime's fist, embedded through the far wall.

"Right."

Pieter whistles, scratching the back of his head and peaking through the massive hole to wave at Jet Alone. Turning back to Gendo, he folds his arms and waits, as Zyuu takes careful, soft steps towards Shinji.

"Zyuu."

"Sorry, Dad."

"Well," Pieter says, and groans, rubbing the bridge of his nose, "Commander, you need to head up to Project E. We just made contact with Unit 01's core. You're going to need to see this."

*

*

Four legs pumping, Go-kun charges, AT Field flashes as he wades through the wave of light and force and slams his drill into ADAM's face, knocking back the First Angel before slamming all four feet into Him and flipping off, launching the Giant towards the ruins of Tokyo-3.

Inside the Entry Plug, the lights come on and Shinji peaks his head over the chair, finding only a cloud of milky white water floating where someone should be sitting.

"*Heee~ey. Try not to touch that. I think that used to be me.*"

The white and back plugsuit floats by. He recognizes the voice.

"A-Ayanami?"

"Terrific," the red haired, bandaged girl says, "We've gone crazy. Again."

A pillar of light stabs the sky, reducing the wreckage of Tokyo-3 to ash and glass as the shockwave spreads out, Go-kun spreading wings of light and vaulting over it, his AT Field becoming a spinning top of white flame, wrapping around his drill arm as he dives down towards ADAM.

ADAM brings his hand up, the light wrapping around his fingers and becoming a great, two pronged lance of light. Letting it fly, it slams against the drill, the sky turning blue from the light given off, as if a new sun had been born on Earth.

Another pulse, and Go-kun is launched through the air, wings flashing light thrusters to lower him to the ground. Cracking the knuckles on his left hand, he spins his drill.

"**Come on,**" he says, "**Is that the best you can do?**"

ADAM's eyes flash. From orbit on this dead world, one can see the entire Japanese Archipelago shatter.

As the Pacific rushes in to fill the gap, Go-kun hops between still floating chunks of island, floating in the air from the power that warps gravity and space around it, with ADAM at the center of the maelstrom. The light surrounding Him becomes a cyclone of destruction and rage, ripping into the crust beneath before exposing the red hot mantle.

A bellow of rage from the Giant of Light, and behind him Asia begins to crackle and fold backwards, unraveling like badly stretched plastic wrap. The Pacific boils, clouds of red filling the air as Go-kun gains height, white wings flashing as he dives down, feet first.

"**You're looking awfully pale,**" Go-kun announces, "**Let's see if you**

tan."

Slamming two feet into ADAM's chest, he twists around, grabbing the primordial god by the waist as jets fire along his back.

"**IZUNA DROP!"**

And twisting the both around, he reverse pile drivers ADAM into the ground below.

*

*

Mana paces, waiting outside the bedroom at the Commander's apartment. Needless to say, the kid wasn't conversational after they picked him up from the Girls, who absolutely loved the idea of having a Baby Brother in their own typical, traumatizing way. The Commander's still at NERV. They found something with Unit 01, his Unit 01, that had them all in a tizzy. If it's any clue to getting the others back, all the better. Maybe when they all get home, she can sleep again.

Maybe they can find a way to get them home without sending Shinji back, to. She read the reports about his life back home, and nearly went to deck the Commander for what his counterpart did to the kid.

Screwing up her resolve, she raps her knuckles on the door.

"Come in."

The voice is meek. He is meek. What the Hell did they *do* to the kid back where he came from?

She opens the door, hearing the soft laughter from the television. The images are recent, showing an outing they had between the attack of Shalgiel and Iruel's mindf__ of them all. He sees himself, two years older, smiling meekly as Asuka practically stands on him for support, watching as Rei bounds around the picnic grounds on a sugar high, having eaten the cake that was originally set aside for the Project E staff.

Standing next to him, Dr. Ikari smiles at the camera, Asuka a step just behind Shinji, avoiding the spotlight as always, and Shinji pauses the image.

"I..."

He shakes his head.

"I know her, don't I?" he asks, "The woman. I know her somehow."

Mana nods, sitting on the bed next to him.

"That's...Dr. Yui Ikari," she says, "She's your mother."

He nods. No surprise, no protesting. He just nods.

"Why does she look like Ayanami, then?"

"Because she's Rei's mother, to," Mana sighs, squeezing his shoulder, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but...f__ it. Rei's your half sister. She was created by Dr. Akagi's mother, as far as I know. She looks like your mom because she used your Mom's DNA to make her."

He goes silent. His arms wrap around himself, his shoulders shaking, his chin pressed against his chest.

"...*God,*" he whispers, "Oh God. Really? Rei's my..."

She squeezes his shoulder, draping an arm around his shoulders and pulling him into a half hug.

"You had a similar reaction when you found out, to," she says with a small chuckle, "I...I shouldn't joke about this. But when you first came over, from what everyone told me, Rei freaked you out so badly you locked yourself in a bathroom and hyperventilated. No one blamed you, either. Rei carried you out. It pretty much went from there. They showed me footage of your fights, and it was obvious at first you had no goddamned clue what you were doing, but you did it. And then we got f__ed in the head by Iruel and things went to shit for me."

She lets him go, pulling her knees into her chest. Silently, she stretches out her left arm, slowly turning it. Letting him hear the shifting gears and plates as a small smirk crosses her face.

"NHIS rebuilt me," she says, "And they were going to decommission me. We faced this Angel, and it was huge and...well, I pretty much gave up. I knew I was going to die. Then you came and yelled at me over the comm channel, told me that out of all of us pilots, I never gave up. I never backed down. So, the reason I'm still alive today is because of you, Shinji."

"That wasn't me."

"Well, maybe not," she says with a shrug, "But it was. Same you, but different circumstances. He's the you that you'd be if some things were different, but the you that you can still become. That's the only difference here, Shinji. The only difference is circumstances behind everything, but circumstance only changes so much."

He nods, staring at the image.

"Which remind me," Mana says, "You have a girlfriend waiting for you back home?"

"No," he says, coming out a little more bitter than he intended.

"Sweet. Because I wanted to try this."

He opens his mouth to ask what she meant, when she presses her lips against his own. His eyes go wide as she does so, hands spasming but relaxing soon after when he realizes his nose isn't pinched closed. Her hands are on his own, resting on his, as their eyes close for a long moment through the simple, warm, chaste kiss.

It ends slowly, the grin on Mana's face matched only by the wide, goofy smile on his own.

"Well, that's another thing crossed off my bucket list," she says, "Dinner?"

He dumbly nods. She gets up and walks out. After a moment of watching her leave, Shinji collapses back onto the bed.

*

*

It took five minutes after he was told that the AI of Unit 01 was, in fact, the other universe's version of Yui Ikari for Gendo to order everyone else out of the lab. They stare at each other; the Supreme Commander of NERV and the soul in an avatar body, as Gendo pulls over a chair and sits in it.

"It's been a while," Yui says.

"It has," he responds, "For you. You did it. You went and you did it."

The avatar nods, studying the needle like fingers.

"I had to," she says, "There was no other way."

He nods, silently, as she walks, tethered by the power cable and landline, walking over to another chair and sitting in it herself. She folds bladed hands in her lap, the body, based on Rei's appearance, almost a match for her own. She could be no older than her 30's in that Core, having gone through with the initial contact experiment years ago.

"It has been some time," she says, "Some time since I could speak, even if it isn't my mouth. I could tell some things are different on this world. How is our son?"

He is silent, staring at her. She stares back, tilting her head, waiting as he taps his fingers on the armrest and finally finds the appropriate words.

"You sick *bitch."*

*

*

Inside the plug, Shinji and Asuka both scream as the world becomes a tunnel of molten red, bursting out through a second hole in the desiccated remains of Paris. With a blast of its retrorockets, Go-kun rights himself, landing on all four feet as ADAM rises into the air, the landscape around Him freezing and shattering with a mournful crackle. Reaching out, Go-kun grabs the nearest object to wield as a weapon, tearing with impossible strength as its moorings disengage.

And then swings the Eiffel Tower directly into ADAM's face.

It hits nothing, ADAM gone in a blink, appearing above Go-kun and behind him, the Evangelion letting the momentum carry him and hammer throwing the national wonder directly into the god's face.

It hits, the metal freezing, and shredding, but one of the girders pierce His shoulder. He screams, thrusting out a hand and letting the blast fly.

From the surface of the Moon, one would see it. The small burst of light in the heart of Europe followed by the blossoming of the Earth on the other side of the world. As the light streams, and curves, the continent of Australia ceases to be, debris launched into orbit of the world as the Pacific Ocean drains into the exit wound.

The ring of red begins to shift, rising and wrapping around itself, leaving the world as it forms into a red sphere. A flash of its collective AT Field, and it speeds off, abandoning the Earth to its fate.

And in Paris, ADAM stares at the hole in the ground where Unit 05 once stood. Something within Him stirs, something eliciting a memory. Is it-

"**INAZUMA KICK!**"

And four drill-feet slam into its face, Go-kun riding ADAM down into the ruins of the city. Slamming his closed left fist into ADAM's face, he straddles Him, pounding him before the white field flashes and launches Go-kun skyward.

"**This isn't going well,**" he says, "**I'd say we could use a strategic retreat.**"

He must not follow.

"**He isn't going to.**"

Go-kun extends his left arm, the white fire surrounding him, forming from wings into lines wrapping into a sphere before the plasma focusing crystal in his held out palm.

"**This ends, here,**" Go-kun says, "**Even if we must die to end your threat, we will. No more quarter asked or given. N2 reactor at full speed!**"

The turbines on Go-kun's back glow, the sphere flashing, becoming larger and larger, as ADAM stands in the ruins of the city.

"**BIG BANG**"

Lines of white run up his left arm. Armor shatters as the sphere becomes as big as the Evangelion itself.

"**ATTACK!**"

The sphere launches as Go-kun's left arm shatters, speeding down into

Paris as ADAM impassively stares into it. It impacts, a solid dome of debris tossed into the atmosphere as France becomes a hole in the ground, sinking Europe into the mantle as the recoil sends Go-kun skyward, the light in his eyes dimming as he enters the black and white sphere.

*

*

"You knew the risks," Gendo says, circling the seated avatar, taking care not to trip on the cable, "You knew what would happen if you activated Unit 01, synched with it, with a blank core. Even a partial synchronization would have left your mind irreparably damaged and broken. And you did it anyway."

"There was no other way," the avatar says, "The Evangelion was needed to fight the Angels."

"There. Was," Gendo growls, "You found it...no, *My* Yui found it. She cancelled the Contact at the last moment. Unit 01 took a bite out of her in the process. She had to have her kidneys replaced and her pancreas was torn so badly that she needs insulin shots for everything she eats. She was touch and go for *two years* but she found another way."

He sits down across from her, folding his hands in front of his face.

"Then you're lucky," she says, "You found an alternative."

"You never even looked," he continues, "And let me guess. You never told your Gendo about everything did you? About the Synthesis project, or about your idea for a grave marker for the human race?"

She says nothing. Her mechanical face is unable to register shock, so she simply nods.

"You told me humanity was doomed," he says, "That the Evas would serve, should an Angel initiate Third Impact, as a testament to the human race and allow us to be eternal."

He smirks, chuckling to himself.

"She was three sheets to the wind when she said that," he says, "We had a...long conversation afterwards. But you were serious, weren't

you? That's why you put yourself in the Eva, and left behind a traumatized son and broken husband. Is that it?"

"Synchronization has its price."

"Save it," he responds, folding his arms, staring her down behind his glasses, "You are not my wife. Mine listened for a change instead of hording her secrets like her megalomaniac father. Mine found an alternative that didn't turn me into a complete bastard and made our son a nervous wreck. Sohryu at least had the excuse of being a workaholic with intimacy issues. You just wanted to be God."

Kicking back the chair, he stands, hands in his pocket as he stares down the miniscule simalcrum.

"So, what will you do?" she asks.

"I was thinking of dynamiting your Core," he says, "But that's petty. Instead, I'm going to figure out how to rescue my wife, son, daughter and my son's girlfriend, and if we manage to get Sohryu out of there it's an added bonus because she keeps my second in command happy. And now as an added bonus, I'm going to figure out how to do that without sending the boy back to his home universe, so he can grow up here and get the family he deserves."

"You can't just leave us here," she protests, waving around her bladed hands in protest, "If Unit 01 doesn't return, the Angels-"

"Shut up, you manipulative bitch," Gendo interrupts, "But first, I'm going to tell him that you're in the Core. Then, I'm going to make sure that if he pilots again, he does it because he *wants* to. And if he doesn't, you will *never* see him again. I asked myself what it would be like if Yui went ahead with that damn experiment. And now I know what the difference is between you and my wife."

He walks over, clicking a remote hidden in his hand to cut power to the Avatar's limbs.

"The difference is," he says, "You both looked into the abyss. And when the abyss looked back..."

He grabs the landline.

"You *blinked*."

He yanks the cord out. The avatar's eyes dim and the construct slumps

forward like a ragdoll. Staring at it for a moment, he clicks off the power to it and walks out, pushing his glasses up before he hits the lights.

*

*

In the yellow haze of the plug, the oddly colored LCL fills the plugsuit, forming at last into the figure of Rei Ayanami. Shinji and Asuka both blink, seeing her older than they remember, more expressive than they remember. With one less arm than they remember.

"Well, shit," Rei groans, face turning a sickly green as she looks at the empty plugsuit sleeve her left arm should be in, "Ooooh right. 400% synching meant that I get the wounds Go-kun does and wow that's a really pretty color of tang-"

Pitching forward, she vomits, body seizing up as Shinji grabs her, pulling her down to the entry plug floor as the plug lights up again.

"**Pilot Ikari,**" the voice booms, "**Pilot Sohryu.**"

They both look up. Rei weakly waves, giggling.

"**Rei is in danger,**" Go-kun booms, "**She is not dead. Not yet. But her regenerative systems will be taxed extensively in the meantime. Leliel is navigating us to a world where we will find help.**"

The light flashes around the plug, and there is a groaning of metal and tearing flesh.

"**However, I require...help. I am too damaged to act autonomously. I need a pilot.**"

"Really?" he asks, "You need one of us to pilot you? But how can we-"

Asuka has already strapped herself into the seat, gripping the butterfly controls.

"Stop whining, Third," she says, "Take care of Wondergirl. I've got this."

The plug turns transparent once more, diving through the black and white sphere and into a new world, through a blue sky and towards...

Well, towards a dome, and Asuka has just enough time to chuckle before Unit 05 crashes through it, into a dome city and slamming finally into a lake just outside a large, almost familiar building.

"Any crash you can walk away from?" she groans.

The viewscreen flickers, showing them the small fleet and man-shaped machines already surrounding them, as the final groan signals Unit-05's deactivation. And the screen flickers to show a girl with white hair and pale skin, almost a mirror image of Rei...

Except creepier.

She stares at them, first at Asuka and Shinji, and focusing her blood red eyes at Rei. And waiting for a long moment, she finally speaks.

"*Welcome to the Ashcroft Foundation."*

*

*

Leliel flickers, releasing Unit 01 and Unit 02 through the Dirac Sea over Tokyo-3, just as the bombers pass. Both Evangelions crash into the ground, Unit 01 the first up and getting a round of high powered Eva rifle to the face for its trouble. Shinji swears at the controls, feeling the impact as a bruise appears on his forehead, muttering to himself as he wills into existence an AT Field.

"Rei!" he yells, "Damn it, Rei! Respond!"

Silence. Nothing. The Unit 02 and Unit 00 on the other side of the city, mirrors of the ones from just a day or so ago, have already opened fire. Yui is yelling out for Rei to respond on the channel, and none of the Evangelion's sensors give them any sign that Unit 05 made it through the Dirac.

Or any sign Unit 05, and its pilot, are even still alive.

"Damn it," he growls, the controls sluggish, "Damn it! Ichi's still spooked from ADAM! She's barely responding as is!"

"Then we'll end this," Kyoko says, "We'll end this right now."

Tapping her wrist computer, a holographic display of Unit 02's schematics appear, focusing on the series of bolts attached to the Core.

"Zwei," she says, "Disengage all Restraint Bolts. Automatic Emergency response mode. Activate Unlimited Form. Password:"

The bolts turn red. Next to Unit 01, Zwei's four eyes glow green.

"*The Beast.*"

Chapter 43: Taking in the Sights

Author's note: The setting of "Taking Sights" is used with the permission of Layana Six.

The plug turns red. The butterfly controls seize up, and Yui looks over Asuka's shoulder as the screen paints itself with DANGER signs.

"Kyoko," Yui breathes, "I'm going to *strangle* you."

The core beats. A single, loud voice echoes through the plug.

"PROTECT. MASTER."

Outside the Evangelion, the red jet strips shatter. Armor parts at the shoulders as two green rods rise out, the Eva craning its neck as a low moan of pain escapes its sealed lips.

Falling forward, bracing on its hands, eight more rods burst out of its back, its four eyes glowing bright green as the Eva raises its head.

"What's he doing?" Asuka asks, frantically glancing around the plug, "Dr. Ikari, what's happening to Zwei?!"

"Kyoko released his restraining bolts," she explains, "Zwei's abandoning human form."

Bracing on the ground, fingers digging grooves into the earth, Unit 02's jaw finally unlocks. Throwing back its head, he lets off an animalistic roar before the back tenses and he launches.

The red Eva launches, completing one full rotation through the air before slamming feet first into Unit 00, slamming it into the ground before taking off on all fours towards the other 02.

The other Unit 02 falls back, extending both hands to form an AT Field between it and the berserker. For all the good it does. Zwei barrels through, shattering the field, charging directly at Unit 02 with mouth open and teeth bared...

Kaworu Nagisa ascends the final steps into the temporary quarters set aside for himself in the Geofront, clicking on the light and walking

into the sparse apartment. Sitting on the bed, he pulls over his overnight bag, taking out a ring, the size of his hand, and placing it on the floor, taking his watch off of his wrist and pulling a small device with a single lens at the center and placing it at the center of the ring.

The lens flickers, the device coming to life, and forming into an image of a girl with short cropped blue hair sitting in an easy chair and reading a book. She pauses, closing the book and staring at him, slowly pushing her reading glasses up her nose.

"*You are late."*

She says that with no accusation, no tone of anger or outrage. Her voice, as always, is steady and calm. Reading him like a book. A small smirk crosses his face as he folds his hands on one knee.

It helps that this ingenious little device of hers also cancels out the surveillance equipment set to monitor his room.

"I am," he says, "Miss Ayanami. But I have news."

"*And?"*

"Junior has been speaking with Leliel," he says, "They're still alive, all of them. But he's not sure how they're getting home."

Chapter 43: Taking In the Sights

The impact carries both Zwei and Unit 02 through the downtown Tokyo-3, ripping buildings off their moorings and causing abandoned cars to fly through the air. Unit 02 holds him back, the jaws snapping meters from the face, dropping back as it plants a foot in Zwei's gut and legs momentum launch the feral Evangelion through the air.

Zwei ducks in, spins, and lands on all fours, sniffing the air and rising to two bent legs, hunched over as Unit 02 finds its rifle and opens fire.

One hand thrusts out and the AT Field forms, stopping the blasts before it pulses and launches Unit 02 through the air.

In Central Dogma, Kozou Fuyutsuki narrows his eyes, leaning towards his once protege and source of information.

"I take it this never happened?" he asks.

The beardless Gendo Ikari grunts an affirmative, hands tented in front of his face.

"No," he says, "Unit 01 tore its way out of the Angel. And Unit 02 never went berserker...not like this. This didn't happen like *this,* not last time."

Shinji stares in dumbstruck horror as Zwei charges after the Eva, emitting a sound similar to a wounded beast as he does so. No, not a beast.

Like a crazed, feral dog, intent on ripping out its enemy's throat.

Grunting, he's brought out of his reverie by the impact of several shells to Unit 01's face, growling as he sees Unit 00 up and about, two shoe prints in its chest.

"Serves you right," he growls, "Ichi! C'mon, Ichi! I need a little help!"

"Hold them off," Kyoko orders, "Zwei can-"

"Doctor Sohryu, kindly *shut the Hell up,*" he says, "Ichi! I don't have time for this! Help me!"

"*Synchronization at 121%. Accessing Dirac Armory. Accessing Gravity Gun."*

The air around Unit 01's right hand glows, lines of white tracing the outline of a large, bulbous object with three claws bending inward. The focusing lens at the center glows as Shinji aims it at Unit 00, and with a flash the rifle is ripped from its hand, hovering in front of it.

And another flash whacks Unit 00 in the face with the rifle but before the Eva glows as well.

"Bye."

And another flash launches Unit 00 into the Pacific.

Zwei charges, howling, ripping up landscape and street as he barrels down the length of Tokyo-3 towards Unit 02. Screaming, roaring, howling, with razor teeth bared he leaps the final distance, riding Unit 02 to the ground and bringing back a fist to plant through the red Evangelion's face.

"Asuka," Yui demands, "What are you doing?!"

Tapping the computer on her wrist, her A-10 connectors glow bright blue.

"Calming him d-down," she says, "Stage 3! Synchro *start!"*

She grips the butterfly controls and clenches her eyes shut. Zwei's fist pauses in mid strike, the restraining bolts sinking back into the armor as the lights in his four eyes dim. With a final, painful groan, Zwei collapses on top of Unit 02.

"Good work," Yui says, "Asuka, take us to NERV."

No response.

"Asuka?"

She leans over, and pushes on Asuka's shoulder. And the red haired girl pitches forward, blood streaming from her nose.

"This *never* happened," Gendo says, walking down the steps from the elevator and down the metal hallway, Kozou at his side, "Unit 01 was supposed to *rip* its way out of the Angel."

"It was also supposed to berserker against the Third," Fuyutsuki adds, "But it didn't. Did you have two..."

"Unit 02? No. No, Unit 02 stopped being that useful after the Seventh, in all honesty. And there was only one. This is definitely not right."

They enter the hangar as the Evangelions are lowered into cages. The second Unit 02 takes the spare Cage, the plug popping out and LCL draining to the hangar floor. The two watch, standing at the massive double doors of the hangar, standing on high as they observe the two new Evangelions being unloaded.

Impassively, they watch, observing and taking notes, noting the differences between his stories of the last time around and their new observations.

Although, from the way Ikari's jaw drops as Yui Ikari strides out of Unit 02's plug and then smacks Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu hard enough to make her grip the railings, Kozou can guess this is new to him, to.

Shinji reacted as soon as he could, charging in and pulling his mother off of Dr. Sohryu, holding her back as Kyoko holds her bleeding nose and struggles back to her feet.

"Are you *insane?!"* Yui screams, "You activated the *Beast Mode* remotely?!"

"Beast mode," Fuyutsuki says, stroking his chin as he watches the scene, "Must be a variation of the Dummy Plug. Right?"

Gendo stares at the scene, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. Donning his lenses once more, he confirms that, yes, two very dead woman are currently in a screaming match.

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" Kyoko screams back, "Unit 01 wasn't moving and we *know* what the Evas do when they come face to face with ADAM! I had to force something or else we were going to get ripped to shreds!"

The medical team at Zwei lays Asuka on the stretcher, the breathing mask over her face, wheels squealing as they hurry her out of the Cage.

Shinji drops his mother and runs out after the gurney. Fuyutsuki looks to his side just in time to see the doors shut as Gendo sprints down the hallway. Turning back to the two women, then turning to where the Third Child disappears through the exit doors, he ponders for a moment a nugget of information.

"Did she say...*ADAM?"*

She stirs, softly, memory fuzzy as her eyes open to the familiar white ceiling. Except that it is not the familiar ceiling. Not yet. She's not home, not even in the familiar hospital wing of NERV. Not yet, at least.

Slowly, painfully, she sits up, staring at the intravenous drip in her right arm before lying back with a groan, oblivious to the people around her. Sitting by her bedside, as he has in the hour since she was admitted, Shinji sighs and squeezes her hand, relieved at least that she has woken up.

"Doctor Akagi confirmed that there should be no brain damage," the familiar voice says, "We uploaded the records from your Unit 02's

plug."

Kozou Fuyutsuki stands in the doorway of the hospital room, hands in his pockets, waiting for Shinji to respond.

"Professor," Shinji says.

"I see you don't call me 'Subcommander'," he says with a small smirk, "Are things that different on your world?"

"A...little," Shinji responds, "And you retired a couple of weeks ago. Asuka's father replaced you. You wouldn't happen to know where my mother is, would you?"

Kozou nods.

"The Commander figured she would be more...amicable if she got to greet Rei when she returned," he says, "Unit 00's being lowered into the cage as we speak. She'll be along in a few minutes."

It is considered irregular to allow a woman who is legally dead onto the Cage catwalks as an Evangelion is lowered into its resting position, but the Commander's orders have long superseded common sense. Needless to say, if the woman somehow checked out as being the dead-for-ten-years wife of the Commander, and the woman who practically thought up the Evangelions to begin with, then she would at least know how they *worked.*

Possibly better than Dr. Akagi does, but on the other hand they knew better that to vocalize that thought.

Instead, they watch, along with her, as the orange giant is lowered into its resting place in Cage 1, as the Entry Plug is released and the pale girl climbs out of it in her, as always, understated fashion. None of them could know that she had, just hours before, lost her own daughter. None of them could know that on the world she came from, Rei Ayanami was raised by her as her own child, although many notice the odd similarity between the two women.

Needless to say, though, that everyone present is rather surprised when Yui Ikari pulls Rei Ayanami into a hug.

"Sorry," Yui says, holding the girl at arms length as she stares at her, "Do you know who I am?"

Rei nods, as always in understated fashion.

"You are Yui Ikari," she says, "The Commander's wife. You are not dead?"

"It's a long story, Rei."

The pale girl nods.

"Then my purpose is fulfilled," she says, "Will I be permitted to die, now?"

Kozou checks his watch as he enters the Mausoleum, clearing his throat. Gendo looks up, tapping closed his computer as Fuyutsuki walks over.

"Well?"

"Did you just send her to meet Rei?" Fuyutsuki asks.

"Yes. She went on length about how they lost their version of Rei," he responds, "It should calm her down to be reunited, after a fashion."

Fuyutsuki nods, and pulls over a chair. Sitting down, he stares at Ikari as the Commander stares back. Tapping his watch, Kozou waits, hearing the distant *ding* of the elevator's chime.

"Three...two...one..."

The doors slam open. Yui marches in, walking across the distance as Gendo steps out from behind the desk. And the Subcommander of NERV, second most powerful man in Asia, visibly flinches as Yui Ikari breaks the Commander's nose.

Dr. Akagi protested that she shouldn't be up. She insisted, however, finally getting Maya, their Maya, to wheel her into the Cage. Her head is still pounding and it takes a moment to steady herself on her feet after standing, but that isn't strictly important. The only thing important to her is standing in the Cage. Waiting.

Asuka leans her hands on the railing as she stares at Zwei. On a normal human being, the ticks of nervousness and the worried expression one would have in this situation would be hard to see. On a 200' tall Evangelion they translate to the shoulders shaking as they reattach the jet strips and the head every now and then glancing at

her.

"Ah. There you are."

Zwei is frightened. Asuka can see that. He is frightened and afraid and maybe, just maybe, ashamed of what he did. The fingers are twitching on his hand. He has no threat of going berserker. He is no threat right now at all. He's too afraid of his own shadow to go hostile.

"Asuka. Should you be up?"

Zwei is looking at her. She can see the subtle movement underneath the green lenses as his four eyes shift to focus on her. She can't see it, but knows its there. The fear, the need for reassurance.

"Asuka!"

The hand clamps down on her shoulder. Spinning, nearly falling over, Asuka watches as Kyoko steps back and soon realizes that her thoughts are plainly expressed on her face.

"What did you do to him?" Asuka demands.

"I released his limiters," Kyoko responds, glancing at Zwei, "And it worked. Two Evangelions in under half a minute. I need to find a way to shut it off, though."

Asuka stares at her. She simply stares, her hands unclenching and clenching, her breathing slow, and ragged, and shaky as her lips slowly draw over her teeth as her mother looks right past her and at the Evangelion.

"What is *wrong* with you?"

It's said barely as a whisper, but the venom, the outrage, is loud enough for her to hear. She steps back, eyes going wide for a second before refocusing them on her daughter.

"What?" Kyoko asks, "I had no way of knowing you'd real Zwei in by synching with him."

"He's frightened and scared and the best you can do is 'I need an *off switch.'* He's trying to figure out why you, his *creator* would do something like that to him."

"He is an Evangelion," Kyoko responds, narrowing her eyes, "He is created for a purpose. Don't treat him like a person, because I didn't

create him to be a person."

She sighs, reaching out to take her by the arm and lead her back to the infirmary.

A hand which Asuka slaps away.

"No!" she screams, "You don't get away with this! You don't get away with treating every single *one* of your children like lab experiments! I don't care if you treated me like *garbage* but he deserves better!"

The activity in the cage stops. It become quiet enough to hear a pin drop as Kyoko stares at the girl. No one notices how Zwei's head has also turned.

"Asuka," Kyoko says, "You are my daughter. Zwei is my creation."

"And you treated him better than me for sixteen years," Asuka responds, shoulders shaking, lips trembling, "You ignored me and belittled me and the only reason you even treat me like a *human being* is because I saved the world twice. But that's just how you think, isn't it? We're just experiments. You just want to see how it will all work out in the end. You wanted to see if Uri could save the world because you drove him to the point he couldn't even consider saying 'no' and you wanted to see how far into the gutter my self esteem would get before I threw myself at whatever pilot you thought would make good breeding stock!"

"I never did any of that," Kyoko growls back, "You and Uri are my *children*."

"Bull. *Shit."*

Asuka raises her finger, her face turning red and her lips trembling.

"Sixteen years," Asuka shouts, "I waited sixteen years for you to just say you were *proud* of me!"

Kyoko's breath catches in her throat. She recoils, her face twisting as if she was struck. Takes a step back, knuckles cracking as her hands ball into fists.

"I know I will never get that out of you," she says, as the tears run down her cheeks, "And I have cried myself to sleep every night since I was *five* because of you. But for you to treat *Zwei* the same way you have treated me is enough. You are a *horrible* human being. You are a

horrible mother."

Asuka moves to push past her. Hand reaching out, Kyoko stops her, hand squeezing her arm.

"I never lied to you," Kyoko says, "I admit, I treated you like garbage, but I never lied to you. Not until yesterday when I lied to that girl's face. I looked her in the eye and I lied to her face, because I *pitied* her. The last thing I want is for you to become like me."

The hangar goes silent. The silence is enough that even in the expanse of the hangar, Kyoko's whispered words carry through.

So does Asuka's slap.

It is a little thing compared to the one Yui used to deck her two hours ago, but it is enough, if not from the physical force but the emotion behind it, that Kyoko recoils, almost falling out of Asuka's way as the girl runs out of the hangar.

Another world. Another place and time. Gendo Ikari reads the reports filed by Captain Kirishima on her charge. Outside of her...incident with him yesterday she has not made any more romantic overtures. However, she does observe that he is withdrawn. There is a way around that.

"Section 2," he says into his phone, "Bring in the Friends."

"We're going to MAN jail! Where they're going to do MAN things to us! In the MAN shower!"
"Ken, will you *shut up* about the *prison rape?!"*

The Section 2 agents showed up at the Shelter they were assigned and escorted them out. Nonetheless, Kensuke Aida has been practically frothing at the mouth in anticipation of what NERV will do to them, but he's been frothing at the mouth anyway since that excursion to the Boot Camp over the summer.

"I think he's just worried about Rei," Hikari says, leaning in to Touji as the Section 2 car drives along the Geofront's main road, "It's been three days."

"Yeah, I'm not buying 'the Angel made him two years younger,'" Touji mutters, "We ain't bein' told something."

The car stops. The side door opens and they walk out, escorted up into the apartment building as the Commander watches from the balcony of the apartment.

It is a wise gamble, he thinks. Reconnect him with his friends, who from interviews he can tell are his friends in his home. Give him something familiar, because from what he can tell an *attentive* father is not something he can process all that well.

Pacing the balcony, the Supreme Commander of NERV begins to think. He needs a plan. He needs to win the boy's trust so they can find a good way to end this situation.

A small grin crosses his face and he snaps his fingers. Of course. That's *it.* That's the perfect way to solve this situation. All he needs is a little time.

And some penguins.

The field is green, level and covered in grass and flowers, and she sits and waits. It has been an odd couple of days, and the other NERV, the one she is in right now, doesn't play music for her like the one she is used to, so she is bored. If she was bored, it would be understandable for her to be antsy, but she's a good girl. She is bored. But she waits for Mom to tell her when they're leaving, and takes the opportunity to relax.

The red and white dog with four green eyes is sleeping next to her. They set up the wireless connection because of all of them, she was probably best suited to talk to him. He's relaxed, now, and he was jumpy when she first started talking to him, like a rabid animal just come down from a high and realizing what he had done.

He was almost inconsolable when he realized that Asuka was hurt reeling him in. Now, he's back to almost normal, taking the form of a large dog lying on its back, taking in the rare downtime to relax.

"Well, this is a treat. You're looking younger."

Ichi, the core sentience of Unit 01, sits up and sees Asuka standing in front of her. Only it isn't Asuka, or even the Asuka on this world. She seems...older. Arcane. Wrong, somehow, and the little girl's head tilts as she stares at the red haired, plug suit clad girl.

Zwei stirs, jumping onto his feet, rearing back as he takes the measure

of the intruder. Then, his tail, which is an Eva power cable inserted into his hind quarters, begins to wag and he sits on his haunches.

"**MASTER!**"

Zwei tilts his head.

"**How did you get in here, MASTER?**"

Asuka pinches the bridge of her nose, blinking and finding that, yes, a four legged Unit 02 is still staring at her.

"One hundred trillion years and that *is* the most f__ed up thing I've ever seen..."

She turns back to Ichi, squatting down to get to eye level.

"Yui?"

"No," Ichi says, and smiles, folding her hands in her lap, "I'm Ichi. You want to speak with my Mommy?"

Asuka, the Asuka who has lived to the heat death of the universe, the Asuka who can less be considered a german teenager and more a walking Crime Against God, blinks for a moment as she processes the words from the little girl in front of her. Sitting down cross legged in front of the girl, she shakes her head, turning with a start as Zwei nuzzles her and lays down next to her.

"No," she says, "No, I think we'll start with you."

The door to the quarters assigned to her slide open, and Kyoko looks up to find someone waiting for her. She isn't a pleasant sight. Not now. Face drawn, knuckles bloody, Kyoko managed to find herself one of the liquor cabinets Katsuragi has hidden throughout NERV, intending to just kill her liver and be done with it.

She thought better of it. Instead, she hacked the MAGI and confirmed that in this universe, as well, she met her end swinging from a ceiling fan. Babbling like a madwoman and refusing to recognize her daughter after the Evangelion raped her soul.

And now, once again, a reminder of her complete and utter failure as a parent is standing in front of her, waiting.

"Um...hi."

Kyoko sighs. Best to get this over with. Asuka, this world's Asuka, is waiting for her.

"Hello," she says, her voice little more than a croak, "I assume you are the pilot of Unit 02, yes?"

She nods, quickly. And then...and then she doesn't babble on. Doesn't recite the facts and figures of her Angel kills or her synch score.

"I am," she says, "And...I'm not sure how to do this. It's been...a while...Mom."

"It has," Kyoko says, finding herself blinking for some reason, "I read the reports. How are you doing?"

Both find themselves at a loss for words. Neither have a way to respond. Both of them rehearsed how this eventual meeting would go if it happened, considering just the momentousness of this occurring. Most importantly, Misato told Asuka to *be herself*. Don't blabber on, don't tell her the life story like it's a report.

"Fine," Asuka says, and shrugs, letting out a sigh, "It's been weird. But it's been fine. Misato's been raising me, Rei, and the idiot. Rei creeps us all out, but now the jack...now Shinji's gotten himself lost in the Dirac. But, hey, you came out of it. We'll get him out eventually, won't we?"

"I hope so," Kyoko responds, trying to hide the wringing of her hands, "How has school been? Has it been...hard, adjusting?"

"I've got my fr...hangers on," Asuka responds with a shrug, "I've got some things going on there. Would you like to join us for dinner?"

Kyoko tilts her head.

"With Shinji gone, Misato's not happy," Asuka continues, "And...well...I thought I'd ask. Get her to cheer up a bit. But you're busy, right?"

"Yes," Kyoko sighs, "I have to help figure out...how we're getting home. You could do something for me, though."

Asuka nods.

"Your...the you from my world," Kyoko says, "Could you talk to her? We had a...falling out. I'd appreciate it if you could talk to her."

Asuka nods, smiling. She walks to leave, almost walking past Kyoko,

before she thinks better of it. Turning to her, she pulls Kyoko into a quick, tight hug, burying her face in her shoulder as Kyoko's hands clench and unclench, as if unsure of what to do, how to respond. Releasing, nodding, the pilot turns and exits the room.

"God. You do it twice and you still f__ it up," Yui says, leaning on her hand as she sits next to Gendo at the long dining table, "Is my original plan so unworkable that it can't work as a do-over? Is that it?"

The beardless commander of NER grumbles something under his breath, pouring himself a shot of the clear liquid and downing it. His drinking problem has, today, taken a back seat to his cross-time duplicate of his wife problem. A chance to see first hand the fruits of her labors has given him a sobering perspective as to the sort of woman Yui was.

"I think your plan of 'Give Godhood to Shinji' had some kinks to work out," he says, rubbing the bandage over his nose, "Damn it. I had an entire speech worked out for if I ever saw you again. It ended with me using a shotgun, to."

"It did?"

"Well, you're not *her,"* he says, pouring another shot of soju, "You didn't leave me a broken f__ up and have a vague plan to redeem humanity that you never gave me the details on. That and you seeing Rei as your daughter. Mine didn't. She had a plan for a human/Lilith hybrid, but I was the one who decided to base it on you."

"Wonderful tribute."

He continues blabbering on. She has no doubt that he's correct, that he's not delusional, that he has experienced some form of failed Instrumentality before it inexplicably flung him back in time. Which is the amazing part, to. That Instrumentality can so hamper the laws of reality that it would enable time travel. Almost like it makes its wielder a God.

"...and he snapped the girl's neck..."

Of course, there's the psychological issues of it. He's clearly a little loopy.

"...fourth Angel with the Positron cannon..."

It is very odd. Her behavior seems to be different in this world, to. Less...hinged. She's never prided herself on being completely, boringly sane. She is a mad scientist, after all. Although it can be boring, being the smartest person in the room, which is probably why she misses Kei.

"...three way with Naoko-"

SLAP.

His glasses skip across the table in response, Yui staring at him past the hand she just slapped him with.

"I deserved that," he says.

"Damned straight you did."

Hands in his pockets, he walks down the hall to the Project E labs, humming to himself some tune he picked up from that kid his ex-wife always had around. The 'Ode to Joy,' he thinks it was. Beethoven's 9th. He never minded when Nagisa was around, he seemed friendly enough, just...odd. But, from what he was told, he was the Chairman's adopted son, and Claire was the Chairman's granddaughter, so it was sort of expected.

And Pieter isn't really sure how he got this line of thought going, as he enters Ritsuko Akagi's pristine, white walled office to find the woman hunched over her desk with a pile of post it notes bound together in a flip book.

"Well?" he asks.

Ritsuko blinks, standing up and turning.

"I've isolated the instructions to about 1000 of the post it notes."

"Out of 40,000?"

"The rest were early drafts of a romance novel, grocery lists, and illustrations of a...graphic nature."

He blinks.

"She did design this after four days without sleep," Akagi adds.

"Point. Can you get it working?"

Akagi nods.

"I can do one better."

At some point, Kyoko decided she had to leave the room, if only to either find Yui so they could get drunk, or find Katsuragi so she could extract a promise not to f__ up with this world's Asuka.

That all went to hell when the computer on her left wrist flashed and That Girl's face appeared in front of her. Judging from the reactions of the people around her, they see her to.

"Makinami?" Kyoko asks.

"*Good morning, Dr. Sohryu,"* Mari says with a wide grin, "*We just got Asuka's Dirac Transmitter working, and I am here to make sure that you're alive, well, and whole. Happy to see me?"*

"Paradoxically, yes," Kyoko responds with a sigh, "Good. This is good. Have you figured out how to get us home?"

"*Working on it. It gets better, to. We've also figured out how to send you some help. You know, company and also someone who can help you navigate whatever the Hell it is you're navigating."*

Kyoko blinks, then scrunches her forehead, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Wait...you can just teleport someone? Why not just pull us back?"

"*We can't teleport humans, Doc. We're sending him over right now."*

Mari disappears. The air in front of Kyoko distorts and then splits, becoming a searing cut in spacetime, gaping before her as two hands grab it at either side and pull it open, letting her stare into the maddening, gaping crevice before her as she has to look away.

The light fills the hallway, fills the sector, as the NERV staff walking around her pause and star with slack jaws as something climbs out.

Greetings, Dr. Sohryu. Pieter will be pleased to find that you are still alive.

He shifts his eyes to the horizontal configuration, twitching his mouth tendrils.

I may be able to better communicate with Leliel than you are. I may be able to help guide us home.

Junior, the final remnant of Sandalphon, blinks as Kyoko blinks back.

And then the red laser sighs cover the floating fish creature, and he comes to notice that each and every NERV personnel around them has pulled a gun out and are aiming at him.

Mm. Yes. We did not factor in that this hallway may be populated.

Which is when he then tosses Kyoko onto his shoulder and speeds down the hallway.

"So, what you're telling me is that you're from a parallel universe," Touji says, "Where everything's...f__ed up."

A whack to his arm from Hikari and Touji yelps, Shinji chuckling. He stares at Kensuke, or at least where Kensuke was. Instead, right now Kensuke is somewhere in the duct work, having explained that he was going to find Pen Pen. Make the place homier.

Which is when he disappeared through the ventilation duct.

"What happened to Kensuke?" Shinji asks.

"Rei happened to him," Hikari says, "Um...Rei's sisters, well...it's a long story."

"I met them," Shinji responds, "I think they tried to do the same thing to me, instead. They're...odd."

Knuckles rap on the door. They turn to find Mana standing there, leaning on the doorway with a grin.

"Hey," she says, "Horaki, Suze. I need you to help me with something. Shinji, your dad wants a minute of your time. And did Aida really..."

"Crawl through the vents like a male version of Rei?" Hikari finishes, "Yes he did. I'm worried about him."

"Everyone's worried about him," Mana responds, "It's Stockholm syndrome. But with more produce. Move it."

Shinji nods with a groan, walking out of the bedroom and walking

down the hall, into the kitchen where his father has set up a desk out of the dining room table. He is sitting at the desk, waiting, his hands tented in front of his face and those reflective sunglasses on his face which does nothing to alleviate Shinji's misgivings about the situation.

"Sit."

Shinji does, obediently. They wait, minutes pass.

"My father never gave me this talk," Gendo says, "And it lead to problems down the line."

Another minute passes. Neither say anything. Shinji stares at him, wondering where this conversation is leading to.

"I have observed that you are...close...to Captain Kirishima."

Another minute. Shinji's fingers tap the armrests. For some reason, he can tell that his father is also very, *very* uncomfortable.

"I think we should talk," Gendo says.

A beat. Shinji sees the diagrams and book set up next to his father's elbows. One of the books he recognizes from Misato's bookshelf. The one with the *illustrations.*

"About women."

Chapter 44: The Parent Trap

Author's note. The settings of Taking Sights and Autum Natem Engel are used with the permission of Layana Six and Earth Scorpion respectively. For sake of sanity, Taking Sights is Earth: Designation TS and ANE is, well, Earth: Designation ANE. The original Nobody Dies setting is Earth: Designation ND. Not that this fic has much in the way of sanity left, anyway. That girl's getting everywhere-

"Heee~ey."

Rei, how did you get in h

END TRANSMISSION

Earth: Designation TS

He made sure the shower lasted extra long. LCL is not something pleasant to have sticking to you when it dries, and considering he never had the chance to properly shower on the last world they were on, this was necessary. His plugsuit's going to be ripe, though.

Although, he has been asking himself; other than the fact that Dad doesn't have the creepy beard, what makes this world different than the last. Did an entire timeline split off because Dad shaved?

No, wait. Dad does shave. He takes meticulous care to look like a creepy uncle. He never calls him on that, because first off, it is rude to point out that your father looks like a pedophile. Second, well, it's just rude to do that. Sure, Dad has his habits, but it's never polite to call him on that sort of thing.

Oh, right. Mom filled him in on this. Apparently, this version of Dad somehow went back in time. And also according to Mom, he might be *completely* insane, which also means she doesn't buy this story.

The door slams shut, and finishing his drying off, he wraps the towel around his waist and steps out of the bathroom.

Asuka is pacing the common room of the quarters, wringing her hands, still in her plugsuit and with tears streaming down her cheeks.

She's babbling in German, alternating between wringing her hands and digging her fingers into her scalp, walking in a circle as he watches. Shaking his head, he once again takes the initiative, walking up to her and grabbing her by the shoulders. She stares at him, vision clearing, and wraps her arms around him, resting her face on his bare shoulder as his arms encircle hers.

"What happened?" he asks.

"I hate Mother," Asuka whimpers, "It took me this long to r-realize how bad she was to us. B-but when she...it was Zwei...I just couldn't stop *yelling* at her!"

He nods, rubbing her back, the odd rhythm becoming a slow dance in the quarters.

"It's alright," he says, "You're not a bad person for yelling at her. You're a better daughter than you give yourself credit for."

He kisses her on the hair, on the forehead, on the nose. She raises her head to meet his, a shaky smile spreading across her face as she rests her arms on his shoulders. Leaning in, she stands on her toes, kissing him on the lips, her lips forcing apart his own as his eyes go open and her tongue finds its way in his mouth.

He hears something sounding like gears whirring in her plugsuit and she slams his back against the wall, still on top of him, feeling her pressing against him through her plugsuit as his hands leave her back and grip the back of her head, eyes closed the only sound the rhythmic moaning of the two as the kiss slowly ends.

"Wow," he gasps.

She smiles back, pecking him on the lips again, resting her head on his shoulder. Which is also when he sees that, in the...activities...his towel fell off and is lying at the center of the room.

As Shinji's luck has a tendency, this is when the door opens and this world's Asuka walks in.

"Hi, Mom asked me to talk to you about-"

And that is the last coherent word from the girl before she devolves into screaming at them both in German. Which is when the door opens and Yui and the Commander walk in.

"Shinji, get ready, we've figured out how to get h...*buh?"*

Glancing from his girlfriend to the fuming german girl to his Mother, who is now for some reason tilting her head as he covers himself with his hands, Shinji idly wonders how this could get any more awkward.

The answer comes in a hole being blown in the far wall and Junior peaking his head in.

Are we disturbing something?

0

0

Chapter 44: The Parent Trap

0

0

A few minutes earlier. Guns are firing as the fish man with the world famous scientist on his shoulder speeds down the hallway, the air rippling as the faint remnants of the Light of his Soul sending him down at appreciable speeds.

"They're gaining!" Kyoko yells.

Indeed. I do have an idea, Dr. Sohryu. But I need you to trust me.

She begins to ask what it is, but has not the chance to, as Junior opens his wide maw and tosses Kyoko in. Falling past the bladed tunnel, she mixes her screams with a musing that Junior is far, far bigger on the inside than on the outside, especially as she drops past the green membranes and through a pulsating hole and into one of his stomachs.

This one is empty, save for the desk and chair and working computer in it, the rest of the room walled with sickly green.

"The fuck?"

This is my seventh stomach. It is a multidimensional spacetime pocket my species uses for storing emergency food. I ate the cubical last week when I was hungry. Dr. Sohryu, I will be reflecting my soul off of yours to create an AT Field. Standby.

Junior's eyes glow. Pausing, he spreads out his arms, the air whipping around him, before the bullets reflect off the orange field and he bursts through the ceiling.

0

0

Ichi can tell very easily that this Asuka is not her Asuka. Although Zwei is comfortable enough around her, the girl, who is far, far older and far, far more powerful than Asuka should be, sets her ill at ease.

"So, wait," Asuka says, "You're not Yui. You're Unit 01."

"Mm hm."

"Except you're Unit 01 that never absorbed Yui."

"Mm hm."

"And he's not Mama. He's Unit 02."

"Mm hm."

"And he's a Unit 02 that never absorbed Mama."

Ichi nods, smiling.

"You're really smart."

"Thanks," Asuka sighs, and scratches her head.

Asuka stares at Zwei, his head between his legs, and sighs again, pinching her nose.

"Well, at least Mama's not licking her balls, then."

Ichi stares at the red haired abomination, blinking.

"What are balls?"

Asuka sighs, and pats Ichi on the shoulder.

"Ask your Mom."

0

0

Yui Ikari blinks, raising an eyebrow. Gendo Ikari, or at least his alternate universe counterpart, tilts his head. Asuka Langely Sohryu, pilot of Unit 02, clenches and unclenches her hands, slowly calming down when they explained to her that he was not cheating on his girlfriend. Miss Sohryu, her counterpart, which was all quite confusing at this point, comes out of the bedroom of the quarters with a pair of sweatpants, handing them to Shinji while keeping her eyes glued on the ceiling.

"Well, there's no way anyone will ever believe this is anything but what it looks like," he grumbles, "So I might as well ask everyone to leave and keep making out with my girlfriend."

He looks up, fastening the pants, to find them all staring at him.

"I said that out loud, didn't I?"

Junior opens his gaping maw. Light from a projector reflects off of his core, forming into an image of Pieter Sohryu.

"*Guess what, everyone? Akagi got Asuka's Dirac Ansible working. How're you holding up?"*

"Pieter?" Yui asks, snapping from her half naked son to the hologram, "I assume this is why Junior's here?"

We believed that I could be transmitted through the Dirac sea without incident. I can also speak directly with Leliel when you re-enter the Dirac.

"*What he said. What have I missed?"*

0

0

Earth: Designation ND

"...so in conclusion, don't push the issue. I thought I could with Moira, but she ended up injecting a strain of bacteria that had me confined to the toilet for half a week and burned down my apartment building, and then she ran off with the bald student down the hall."

Shinji nods, slowly. The story started about relationships and then ended up veering off about people he's never heard of and can't really be bothered to care about.

"So," Gendo continues, "I understand you have become close with Captain Kirishima. How close?"

"Um...she kissed me once," Shinji says, "And...well, that's it. She's nice to me. We're friendly, but I think that's it. I don't think I'd know how to act if I did have a girlfriend."

He taps his fingers together as Gendo stares at him. Finally, the Commander of NERV takes the copy of the Karma Sutra and puts it away, sliding it into a desk draw.

"Right," he says, "Shinji, back home, I understand you have a level of affection towards your world's Rei."

Shinji nods.

"Right," Gendo says, "Hm...how should I explain this...do you remember the Ree?"

Shinji nods.

"Do you remember how they referred to you as their 'Little brother?'"

Shini nods again.

"Well, they were right," Gendo continues, "In a sense. Where you come from, are your father and Rei close?"

"They are," Shinji responds, "She is. She thinks very highly of him."

Gendo nods, taking off his glasses and pinching his nose.

"Well, that's because I, and most likely he, adopted Rei as his own."

Shinji nods.

"So...Rei is my sister?"

"Yes," Gendo responds, "Well...yes. You sound disappointed."

Gendo sighs. He knows what he has to do. What he has to do is shatter the boy's illusions, explain to him what sort of monster his mother, *his* Yui is. Explain to him how every thing he has been spoonfed is a lie to manipulate him and use him.

It would be easy. Perhaps the boy's heart would break, but that is what psychiatry is for.

And yet. *And yet.*

His heart has hardened over the years. It has hardened when he almost lost Yui to Unit 01, and hardened more with the prospect of his entire family being lost. This boy, though, didn't need to harden. This boy could remain innocent, if only a little longer.

"All I can say is that on this world, Rei is recognized as your sister," Gendo says, "As for girls...do what you think is right."

A pause, a beat.

"And sit up straight," Gendo adds, "Don't slouch."

The phone beeps. Sighing, Gendo looks at his, staring at the number for a moment before clicking it open.

"Pieter," he says, "You've made contact? Good. Did you explain the plan for getting them home...wait."

His face becomes drawn, pale. Closing his glasses, he leans back in the chair, and for a moment Shinji sees something he never thought he'd see in his father.

Vulnerability.

"What happened to Rei?"

0

0

Earth: Designation ANE

The Ashcroft Foundation. One of the leading institutes in charge of the study of the Arcane, the technology associated with it, and the defense of the remainder of the human race against threats both mundane and beyond human comprehension. If the Migou were polled right now, though, a verifiable {THREAT} would be lurking within their breast.

A threat with red eyes, blue hair, and smelling of alternate universes.

And she's just found a *hobby*.

It bristles with weaponry. It stands forty meters tall, shaped like an exaggerated humanoid, slightly smaller than her own chariot, yet she cares less about the size than the four particle beams mounted on its head and the plasma lance mounted on its arm. Staring at it, *wondering* what she could do with it, she lets her red eyes go wide and emits a sound that crosses between escaping steam and "Squee."

It comes partly from joy, partly from the wonderment of what she could do with such a war machine, and partly from the cocktail of painkillers currently running through her system to dull the pain of her missing left arm.

At least, until a white clad hand comes down on her shoulder.

Rei Ayanami, pilot of Provisional Unit 05, turns to meet the gaze of Gendo Ikari, representative of the Ashcroft foundation.

"**No.**"

0

0

The hole in the dome of the London Arcology was quickly patched up. After all, a 200' tall spider robot dropping through the sky wasn't something for everyone to get into a damn panic about, not with everything else worthy of panicking over. No, the problem behind the massive robot was that it fit nothing they knew about giant robots.

And rest assured, they knew a lot.

Still, when Doctor Akagi accused the damaged Unit 05 of purposely taunting her by being impossible according to their understanding of

mechanics, physics, and biology, the giant robot responded that, and quote, "**You really need to relax.**"

Less alarming were Shinji and Asuka. That is, the Shinji and Asuka that arrived with Rei, who for some reason their Rei is referring to as "The Rei."

"So," Shinji says, "What do you think they'll do with us?"

Sitting next to each other on a bench in a white walled room, the two survivors of a humanity on another world are quiet. None of the bickering, none of the fighting. That died with their world. A lot of things died with their world, especially inside of them.

"Probably kill us," Asuka responds.

Shinji sighs, folding and refolding his hands.

"Could be worse," he says, "They could make us pilot."

"No! No no no! This makes no sense!"

There was a glint in Ritsuko Akagi's eyes as her hands flew through the Augmented Reality projections, twisting and manipulating the images of the four legged 'Evangelion.'

"This is wrong," she yells, "Wrong wrong wrong! Who designed this?"

"**Dr. Kyoko Sohryu was responsible for the basic structure. The organic components were based on the designs of Dr. Yui-**"

"Shut up! I'm not talking to you!"

Clicking off the projections, Ritsuko paces on the catwalk in front of Unit 05, the visored head moving to follow her.

"You shouldn't even be able to talk!" she continues, "Who uploads a fully sapient unlimited intelligence into an Evangelion? You're not even a real Evangelion!"

Unit 05, which in and of itself is wrong to her, as the Evangelions only go up to 04, tilts its head at her. She has gone far too long without sleep, she knows that. But she was naturally handed this current curiosity on a silver platter and as everyone knows- *knows*- that was the only explanation available. Because the other explanation is that the face of the Eva, the inanimate metal mask, looked offended.

"**What do you mean, 'not a real Evangelion?'**" it booms, "**What is a 'real' Evangelion?**"

Ritsuko snaps her head at him, a slightly manic grin on her face.

"Oh, you'd like to know, wouldn't you?"

"**Enlighten me.**"

"Right. Where to start," she says, "Well, there's the unconventional motive system. Which may be a legitimate design choice, after all. When we built them-"

She jerks her head towards the restrained forms of 00, 01, and 02, in their blue and green urban camo patterns.

"They were tests. I'll also skip over the difference in height. You're a full third taller than the other Evas, but that's probably because they let your organics mature before full conversion, so who knows."

She pauses, tapping up the virtual diagrams of her Evangelions.

"Actually," she says, "Hm...*hm.* If we did let them grow to your height we could probably fit in a proper Frigate-scale D-type engine. *Yes.* If we expanded the cyberutine system for a proper D-type engine we would solve a lot of problems..."

"**I believe you were going to explain how I am not a proper Evangelion.**"

She jerks her head at him, rictus grin still on her face as she shuts down the diagrams.

"Right. Yes, thank you," she says, "Your designers were completely negligent when designing your restraints and armaments. Where are the integrated weapon mounts? Where is the point defense system? Who in *God's* name uses a drill as a primary weapon? Melee went out of fashion for a weapon and it completely compromises your ability to use a capital grade weapons system!"

"The results speak for themselves, Dr. Akagi. I find it extremely effective, and Rei in particular approves of it."

"Yes, Rei," Ritsuko says, and pinches her nose, "And I thought Asuka had an unhealthy connection with her Evangelion."

It was decided, in the best interests of keeping everyone sane, that the new arrivals would for the most part be interrogated by their counterparts. Sohryu would interview Sohryu, Shinji would interview Shinji. The exception was made for Rei, as no one in the Ashcroft Foundation wanted to see what would happen if the two Reis (Ree?) were left alone for any duration of time. Instead, the Representative would interview Rei. The theory was, as he was supposedly a father figure to this Rei, the familiarity would set her at ease.

This illusion, as well as the roof of the building, was shattered as a plume of fire the color of inflamed flesh lanced into the sky and splashed against the roof of the Geodome.

"*I LOVE IT!*"

The Deputy Representative has seen many things. He has lived a long, eventful, and hopefully not soon to end life. Seeing the Representative blackened from head to toe save for the two near circles where his glasses usually are, however, is something entirely new to him.

"Not a word, Fuyutsuki," Gendo says.

"Of course."

Gendo pinches his nose as the interior of his office shakes again, followed by another whoop of joy.

"Well, this Rei is...different," Kozou says.

Gendo glares at him, muttering something under his breath.

"How are we going to explain her to the committee?" Kozou asks.

"If we use the word 'arcano' enough, it may give her a pass with them," Gendo responds, producing a hand towel and cleaning off his face, "The problem is that this...*thisness* is going to make things difficult in the meantime. We need to find a way to confine her. She's like a storm, a force of nature, and wasn't in my office for more than five minutes before she *took apart my desk."*

The banging and explosions stop. The two look at each other, turning and walking into the office, finding it empty.

Save for the ventilation grate on the floor.

"Mother f-"

He wonders what sort of world he lives in when interviewing his alternate universal counterpart is not the weirdest thing that has happened to him since he was called in by his father.

Shinji Ikari, pilot of the Engel-class Titan Unit 01, rubs his eyes as he enters the key code for one of the spare rooms at the Ashcroft foundation. He isn't going home until this is done, as said down from on high, but that doesn't prevent him from getting a damn nap.

However, what is in front of him probably does. Rei, or their Rei, the Rei with one arm and the wide, drug induced smile on her face, is squatting on the desk of the spare room, showing teeth and eyes glowing.

"Heee~ey, know what I figured out?"

He looks from side to side. Keeps his back to the door.

"What's that?"

"You're not *my brother."*

He taps the open command on the door, turning to run, and makes it just out the door before the white hand grabs him by the belt and yanks him back in. Standing in the hallway, watching the entire scene, the white haired, white skinned, gray eyed *sidocci* narrows her eyes.

"This is how *wars* begin."

0

0

Earth: Designation TS

"The plan is this. To force an opening back to our Earth, we need a simultaneous detonation of massed energy. To do so, we will be using the highest energy weapon we have. The Positron cannon. Firing it simultaneously will induce a controlled total protonic reversal."

The screen flickers, showing the diagram and schematics of the high energy rifle, nominally powered by the grid of Tokyo-3.

"The plan has been forwarded through the Dirac to our NERV. The

Mark 06 Evangelion will be used because the properties of the Eva will allow it to find its way back through the Dirac once the implosion takes place.:

A new schematic appears. Two wireframe images of the Evangelions appear, at an equal distance as two beams fire, wrapping around each other and pulling them both across and landing on opposite sides.

"The reaction will cause a dimensional inversion. Unit 01 will fire the cannon from here with Unit 02 hanging onto it. Both will be pulled through the Dirac and to the other side. In turn, Unit 01, your Unit 01, will be deposited here."

The screen clicks off. Yui places the remote on the table in the briefing room, with the pilots, Katsuragi, and Akagi sitting around it.

"Places, everyone," Yui says, "We move in three hours."

The room empties, and the side door opens.

"You're sure this will work."

Not a question, but a statement. He always has deferred to her, meriting a smile from Yui as she turns to him and he smiles back, hands folded behind him.

"I hope," she says, "A version of Shinji, from the first universe we ended up on, ended up back home. Gendo wants to keep him from having to return. I don't blame him. It's like this world was, the first time around."

Gendo nods, folding his arms.

"If I could, I'd hope the Angel deposited him somewhere better," he says, "It isn't easy. What we ask of them. I tried to make it easier, but it doesn't work."

She nods, leaning on the table.

"I tried to help him, and it blew up in my face," he says, "I underestimated how much he would resent me. You're lucky. You never cut him out. I burned my bridges when I sent him off to his uncle."

He looks up as her hand touches his shoulder, her own gaze meeting his as she pulls off his glasses.

"You're not giving up," she says, "Never take this as an excuse. You need to try harder, and be honest. Do you want him to make it through this?"

He nods.

"Then give him a reason to," she says, "Be honest. Try to start over. The first words out of your mouth to him have to be 'I'm sorry.' And maybe, just maybe, you can be his father again."

She leans in and presses her lips against his cheek.

"Now," she says, "Let's get ready. Three hours for us to set the worlds right."

0

0

Earth: Designation ANE.

"**What? You do *what* to them?**"

"The Active Internal Damage micromachines counteract the regeneration of the Evangelions to keep their regen too occupied for them to awaken fully," Akagi explains, "That keeps you so occupied on internal damage that you can't reject the implants. And that's not all. I don't see your cyberwarfare or EM warfare countermeasures to counter the Migou and certainly no Elder sign-"

"**Are you telling me that you *torture* your Evangelions to keep them under control?**" Go-kun booms, inclining his head towards Akagi as she steps back, "**Just because you're not *intelligent* enough to figure out a way to keep them from rejecting the implants, you keep them *pain* to keep them under your thumb?**"

Yes, there was indeed emotion in the Evangelion's voice. If she had to put her finger on it, she'd have to say it's fury.

"Oh, that's rich," she spat, "They're *monsters.* If they were released from their restraints and left to do what their genetic dictates said, they'd destroy us. Maybe a few cultists would be left to pick through the pieces and worship those uncaring things as Gods, but that's it."

Her hands ball into fists. Her nostrils flare.

"So, yes. It hurts them. But I don't care."

The Evangelion's head gazes right at her. A hiss of steam escapes the vents around its visor.

"**I have met you three times, Ritsuko Akagi, and I must say that I like you the least. I cannot say I blame you, though. Humans can be monstrous as much as real monsters are. You lash out at things you do not understand because that is all you are learned to do. Your species is capable of great nobility and great savagery, and it pains me to see that you, of all people, have settled on the latter. And what pains me more is that I can see that your Evangelions are not like I, so there must be souls trapped within those cores. Do you even care of the souls trapped within those bodies? Of Yui Ikari, Kyoko Sohryu, and your own mother?**"

"No!" Ritsuko shouts, and pauses, "Wait, my mother isn't trapped in one of those! She never had a synchronicity accident!"

"**Nonetheless, my point stands.**"

"And like I said, I don't care," she says, and laughs with a short intake of air, "They brought those monsters into this world. They deserve it. Next time you can, read the history of this world. Maybe that will soften your admiration."

"**I see.**"

And Go-kun goes quiet, the light of the visor dimming. He sounded almost disappointed, in a paternalistic sort of way. At least he is quiet, leaving her to work in blessed peace. She will not be lectured by a monster. And she will certainly not be called a monster, either.

What sort of monster did he think he was, anyway?

0

0

Earth: Designation ND.

From behind his desk, Gendo watches as Section 2 escorts the two of them in. The situation was simple. While the Mark 06 was being

prepped for launch and the Positron Cannon was being loaded topside, security cameras found them breaking into Cage Three. As the two stand in front of him, he nods to the Section 2 officers.

"Leave us."

The agents nod and leave, the door closing behind him. In front of him, Shinji and Mana stand silent, as he stands and walks around his desk.

"You were trying to hijack your Unit 01," he says, "Why?"

"It was my idea, Commander," Mana says, "I knew the layout of the base. I-"

"Quiet," Gendo says, voice level, "Shinji, answer me."

"I have to go back," he says, "To my world."

The Commander grunts, balling a hand into a fist.

"No, you don't," he says, "You'll play right into their hands. I'm doing this for your own good."

Shinji stares at him. It's his stare, the same stare he uses. Turning to Mana, he points to the door.

"Prep Jet Alone," he says, "Field it with Nagisa."

"Sir," Mana says, saluting, and walks out.

Glancing between the seat at his desk and the desk, both his hands ball into fists as he turns back to Shinji. The plan was simple. Nagisa could, in theory, find his way back through the Dirac. In theory.

And in theory, Shinji remaining here, on this world, would prevent the rift from closing completely, but it was a chance he was willing to take.

"This is for your own good," he repeats.

"Maybe," Shinji responds, "But what about my world?"

"What about it?" Gendo responds, "What do you have to go back to? We can avoid this. You can have a life here."

"But who has to die for it?"

Gendo pauses, staring at the boy. Staring down at his hands, teeth grinding, Shinji avoids his father's gaze, waiting for an answer that does not come.

"I mean," Shinji continues, "Yeah. I could stay here. Yeah, maybe this is what I wanted. A father who cares about me, a family, and if this plan works I could finally see Mom again...but what about my world? If I'm not there, who stops the Angels?"

"You have other pilots."

"Who barely get along as is. Ayanami and Asuka will kill each other before they world together. Misato is probably beside herself and...I know what you're trying to do."

He looks up at his father, matching his gaze, as a silent moment and beat passes between them.

"But I can't just run away. You said you wouldn't make me pilot unless I want to, and I'm holding you to it. Let me pilot. Let me go back home, and let me try to change things there. I know that deep down, there is someone like you inside my father. I know that my mother is inside Unit 01. I know that my life doesn't have to be miserable because you've shown me. Let me do this."

They both go silent, both waiting. For a long moment, neither says anything as they consider their words. Finally, tentatively, Gendo reaches out and places his hand on Shinji's shoulder.

"I don't know if this means anything," he says, "Since I'm not, technically, your father..."

He pauses, as a small smile crosses his stone features.

"But I am proud of you. I don't know if I could turn down paradise."

"Like Mom always said," Shinji responds, "Anyplace can be Heaven if you want it to be."

Gendo squeezes his shoulder, nodding.

"Right," he says, and taps the intercom on his desk, "Prep Unit 01. We have a change in plans."

Earth: Designation ANE.

They found Rei, or as Rei called her "The Rei" passed out over Shinji. Her pain killers had kicked in just as she managed to get his pants off and conked her out, but given that Shinji then locked himself in the room after they removed "The Rei" until he could find proof that the next person in wasn't trying to sex him, the damage had been done.

"Katsuragi," Gendo says, hiding the fatigue in his voice as he opens the channel to her, "The Sohryus are strangling each other. Again. Intervene."

He pours the two shots, nodding.

"One! Two! Three!"

He and Fuyutsuki slam back the shots of grain alcohol, both grunting as they slam the glasses down. The office has been cleaned and the hole in the roof patched, and he did manage to finally get that desk he really wanted. The one made of oak and maple. With the trap door controls.

"Keep this up and we'll have drinking problems," Kozou says.

"My drinking problem is that I'm still sober. Has Akagi stopped yelling at the Evangelion?"

"If the Evangelion didn't yell back, we'd think she'd have finally gone round the bend. Then it started showing these."

Fuyutsuki clicks a button, images displaying from the holographic projector built into the rebuilt desk. Gendo stares, blinking, before taking off his glasses, rubbing his eyes and staring at the pictures with his naked gaze.

"What. The. F__."

"Baby pictures," Kozou explains, "You see, the Evangelion has been breeding. With Rei."

Gendo blinks, staring at the images, tilting his head as he tries to wrap his mind around what he is seeing.

"A I entities," Kozou continues, "Although they did, according to the

Eva, possess mechanical bodies are are depopulating that world's Australia. Akagi thought they were adorable, in a non Euclidean fashion."

Gendo sighs, placing his glasses back on as Kozou clicks off the images.

"Right," he says, "More importantly, what has the analysis of the Evangelion's onboard data given us? I want to know more about this ADAM creature. More to the point, is there any chance it can follow them here?"

Rei looks up, the white sidocci staring at the ventilation duct.

"Come out."

The vent cover drops to the floor, 'The Rei' hanging upside down out of it and pouting.

"I knew you would come," Rei says, "What do you want, other than more pain pills?"

'The Rei' continues staring, letting her one arm hang listlessly before bringing her hand back up and waving it back and forth over her face, smiling.

"You are easily distracted," Rei says, "You have already stopped paying attention. This is not just the result of your using the pain medication to deal with the loss of your arm, but it is your nature and short attention span."

Rei continues to stare as The Rei flips onto her feet, looking around the washroom.

"How is it we share genetic material?"

"Do we?" The Rei asks, "I dunno."

"We do not share the material of Lilith," Rei responds, "But we do share a common origin in Yui Ikari. And yet where my nature veers towards my knowing, as that is my station, your nature veers towards massively energetic violence and inappropriate actions."

The Rei balances on her toes, hopping onto the sink and climbing onto the ceiling, crawling along it on all threes as she tries to see if she can

stick her tongue in the light fixture.

"You are not paying attention," Rei says, "You are bored, again. As it must be."

"You're *boooring,"* The Rei says, hanging onto the fixture with one arm, "You're so boring. You're whole world's boring if this is how I am here."

"We fight and kill creatures named after Caananite deities."

The Rei grins, bouncing down onto her feet, swaying side to side.

"An you got such cool toys, to!" she shouts, "Hey...your Gendo will get his fingers back, right? I mean, theoretically, if I played with one of the fun toys."

Rei narrows her eyes.

"You deserve to die. Your entire clone line must be purged. Not one of you should be allowed to live."

The Rei pumps her fist into the air, squealing.

"A'right! REI FIGHT! Two Rei enter, one Rei leaves, and maybe some backups. **FINAL DESTINATION!** It's on, girl!"

Which is then followed by The Rei grabbing Rei by the collar and frenching her. Hard. The sidocci's eyes snap wide and The Rei back flips away, bouncing off her feet and into the ventilation duct with a mad cackle.

Rei only narrows her eyes.

0

0

Earth: Designation ND.

The purple feet of the titan slams into the pavement, hands tightly gripping the handles and trigger of the massive cannon as the transformers spark over its surface. Inside the plug, Shinji grips the butterfly controls tightly. He knows what is inside his chariot, now. His synchronization score is nearing a 1 to 1 ratio. Behind him, the

Mark 06 and Jet Alone extend their AT Fields.

"This is Unit 01," he says, "Ready."

0

0

Earth: Designation TS.

The purple feet of the titan slam into the pavement, hands tightly gripping the handles and trigger of the massive cannon as the transformers spark over its surface. Unit 02 is holding onto the power cable, and inside the plug, Shinji grits his teeth as the A-10 connectors spark. Ichi is counting down, and behind him, Dr. Sohryu is calling out data. Behind him, this world's Unit 00 and Unit 02 extend their AT Fields..

"Unit 01," he announces, "Preparing to fire!"

Separated by the gulf of the Dirac Sea, the two Unit 01's heft up their weapons, standing at the edge of the black chasm at the heart of the city. In their respective Central Dogmas, connected by the Ansible through the void between universes, the respective trajectories are matched up.

In one world, Pieter Sohryu gives the order to fire.

On the other world, Gendo Ikari gives the order to fire.

The power grid of an entire country empties into the capacitors of two identical Positron cannons, the tip of the barrel glowing bright enough to make the shadow of Leliel, floating above the city, fold in on itself.

And two blasts of white lance into the shadow. Streams of light criss cross in the Dirac, wrapping around each other, reaching a critical mass as the void glows and releases its light through the portals

---

0

0

Earth: Designation ANE.

Shinji, Asuka, Shinji, and Asuka watch as 'The Rei' tips the bowl in one hand, the container almost half her size emptying the curried protein mix down her gaping maw. Both Asukas tilt their heads as both Shinjis stare, wondering if this is, indeed, the moment they have lost their sanity.

Then comes the ham. They watch as she distends her mouth to shove the entire shank in, rotating it with her right hand before pulling the clean bone out of her mouth.

Tossing aside the bowl and the bone, she grips the table with her right hand, clenching her eyes shut as she raises her left shoulder.

"Oh man," she says, "This is gonna hurt like a *mother f__er!"*

A low, inhuman, gurgling sound escapes her mouth. The Asuka with the eyepatch tilts her head as the other Asuka covers her mouth, turning green. Both Shinjis watch transfixed, before one gets up to help Misato, who fainted sometime around when the feeding began.

It starts as a distortion in the air lancing out from the stump, slamming a hand shaped indentation on the far wall as her eyes glow. Something glows beneath her skin around her abdomen, where her appendix would be.

Her AT Field flashes, wrapping around her shoulder, forming into the outline of the limb, flesh and bone shooting from the shoulder as she throws her head back and howls in a manner not dissimilar from a berserk Evangelion. The room shakes, her teeth bared as the table itself rises almost up to the eye level of the transfixed youths.

And with a flash of light, it is over. Rei stares at her newly regenerated left arm, popping her knuckles for the first time.

"Wow," she says, "I never want to have to regenerate an entire limb again."

Both Asuka's faint as both Shinjis continue to stare.

"Well, that was fun," Rei says, bouncing to her feet and tossing back a handful of painkillers, "Who's up for Chinese?"

0

The Dirac Sea.

Unit 01 floats, drifting in the void. Inside the plug, Shinji Ikari opens his eyes, seeing the endless nothing beyond his plug. It worked, to an extent. Now he just needs to find a way home

And opens his eyes on the mag lev train. Sitting across from him is him.

"Okay," Shinji says, "Let's talk."

0

0

Earth: Designation [ERROR]

Shinji opens his eyes, blinking as the pastel blue sky fills his vision. Looking down, he notices his plug suit is a lot more colorful. Or at least, the subtle whites are now bright white, the blacks more solid and the blues looking like they were stenciled on with a crayon. The 01 on his chest looks like it was written in permanent marker

On the horizon, the school building winks at him with the one eye built into its main tower, right as the sun collides with a bird flying across the sky, knocking them both out. A hair covered cyclops ambles by, regarding him with a nod of what he guesses is the head.

Turning to his right, he sees Zwei, sitting on his haunches, his power cable ending attached to a collar around his neck with the numbers '02' written in decorative gold. He is about Shinji's height, locks around his jaw open and panting with his long tongue hanging out the side.

He turns to his left. He looks down. Ichi stares back up at him, Unit 01 now half his height, with its purple and green armor now overlaid with a purple and green plaid frilly dress and pink bow on its horn.

The entire world is pastels and stop motion around them. Reaching out, he scratches Zwei behind the ear, and finally finds the words to describe the situation he has landed in.

"What the f-"

Chapter 45: Reasons

Leliel, the Hole of the Worm, the Tunnel in the Mountain, the Jaws of God, looks around in its form of the black and white sphere and considers that it has severely miscalculated what happens when the Lilim Divide by Zero.

Rotating in place, the Sphere wonders why it cannot feel the Sea of the Void. It wonders why the pilot of the red Shadow of Father is staring at him, alternating between looking at him and Brother Sandalphon, who is now the size of her hand and sitting in a decorative fish bowl. Leliel also wonders how someone who much resembles Lilith's progeny has just grabbed him and is now bouncing him on the pavement.

Asuka just watches him go, scratching her head and turning to Junior, who stares at her from beneath the surface of his bowl. The pinks on her plug suit are pinker, and the built in electronics for some reason are now flickering on and off like a neon sign.

Pilot Sohryu.

"Junior."

She looks around, just as she spots her Mother. Or at least, before the large bird flying overhead drops a bean bag on...

No. No, that wasn't a bean bag. Oh dear.

"Oh my," she says, "Um...Junior, where are we?"

"I'd say we're in f__edupville, population, us."

Asuka spins and comes face to face with herself. Well, something like herself. Maybe at some time in the distant past she was like herself, but she's not so sure now, like the face the girl is wearing is a mask of familiarity, with something squirming and shifting underneath.

Asuka Langely Sohryu, pilot of Zwei, stares at Asuka Langely Sohryu, who has lived to the heat death of the universe.

"Yeah, give me warning when you jump universes, hun," the ageless being says, "I think the pastel Wondergirl stole our ride home."

0

Zwei spots the bird, rearing up on his hind legs. The bird is unnatural, alien. And alien means one thing.

"ANGEL!"

He takes off. The moment he does, Shinji looks down and realizes that yes, he is is indeed holding Zwei's leash.

"Son of a bi-"

Screaming, he's carried off into the distance, flapping like a flag in the wind. Ichi moves to follow, but her legs are much shorter than what she is used to. Her feet catch on each other and she flaps her arms, almost remaining aloft before she pitches forward to the ground. Or would have, at least, had someone not caught her.

Ichi looks up. Yui smiles back, offering her hand.

Taking it, she helps Ichi stand, holding her hand as Ichi finds her feet, steadies herself.

"Let's follow," she says, "But slowly. It's like you're learning to walk, isn't it?"

Ichi nods, the cheeks of the face armor curling up in a smile warmer than the face mask's rictus grin. And following Yui's lead, she walks alongside her, following the dog and the boy in their attempt to find their way home.

0

Chapter 45: Reasons

0

Evangelion 01: Designation CANON

The mag lev train circles Tokyo-3. He knows, though, that it is not a mag lev train. He also knows that it is not Tokyo-3 he is circling. Instead, he stares across the train cabin to his duplicate, almost absently noticing the SDAT in the palm of his hand. Nothing is said, nothing is muttered, both of them sitting in silence.

Which is when Shinji switches off his SDAT and stands up.

"Okay," he says, "Let's chat. What do you want?"

His counterpart looks up, ear buds still in his ears.

"**Solitude. We are, all of us, alone.**"

0

0

Earth: Designation ANE.

He was settling in nicely. Well, he still woke up screaming at night, images of Ayanami's corpse hemorrhaging out the totality of human existence flashing before his eyes, but he was settling in. The fact that the Ashcroft foundation had him speaking to a therapist helped matters considerably. He was opening up to someone, talking about what he's seen. Maybe that's why he feels like a weight has left his shoulders.

Asuka refused to talk to anyone. He's pretty sure she hasn't had a decent night's sleep since they arrived.

It was the fact that this world's Asuka was like Asuka but...moreso that was probably the reason they kept getting into fights. It was also probably the fact that they couldn't pilot that made the fights worse, because while he certainly didn't mind that he never had to get into an Eva again, Asuka didn't share that hopeful optimism towards the future.

Asuka mainly ignores him, nowadays. He minds, yes, but at the same time he doesn't mind. They haven't gotten along for a while, even 'The Rei' as one Rei insisted on calling her said that 'her' Shinji and Asuka were a cute couple. Just the thought of that was making his head *hurt*. Asuka just stared at him whenever the subject was brought up. If anything, she seems to be even angrier than he remembers.

Well, there was also what happened when they took off her bandages. That wasn't...pleasant.

He was too busy focusing on the adjustment. The world they found

themselves in was...bizarre and fascinating and terrifying at the same time. The technology they had seemed like magic, and by some definitions it was. The handheld computer they gave him, for example, was beyond anything he's ever seen.

Ah, wait. Screaming.

Yep, they're at it again.

At least he can tell which Asuka is his, because her left eye is now a deep red, like Ayanami's.

Sighing, he pushes off the railing, turning to exit the Cage and comes face to face with Rei. Gray eyes stare back at him and, startled, he stumbles back, slipping and falling over the railing to a terminal fall. Or, at least would have if she didn't grab him by the front of his shirt.

"Operation CATO will begin soon," the sidoci says, "You and the other Sohryu will be hidden in Unit 05's entry plug."

Shinji nods, dumbly. In the two weeks he's been here, he has learned not to contradict Rei. Their Rei. Because she knows.

"You will ask why."

"Um...why?"

"Because you will be leaving, soon," Rei responds, "And you must be ready to leave. He is coming."

She releases him. He falls against the catwalk railing, scrambling to his feet and catching a sight of Unit 01, their Unit 01, as the last of the Type-D armor is fitted.

He turns, to ask for clarification.

But Rei is already gone.

0

0

Unit 01: Designation CANON.

"So what is it?" Shinji asks, "What do you mean, we're alone? I know

that. I've heard that line from everyone, and just because you're an Angel doesn't mean you're right."

The Angel pauses. It looks at Shinji, wearing his face, and yet it finds that for the moment, its words ring hollow.

"**No one understands each other. All we do is hurt each other.**"

"And if there was no pain, we'd never know what joy was," Shinji responds, "We define ourselves by who we are to other people! I know who I am because of how everyone reacts to me!"

The he who is not he narrows two glowing eyes, standing up as the train grinds to a halt.

"**You are ignorant and naïve,**" he/it says.

"And you're *afraid,*" Shinji responds, "That's why you look like me. You're afraid of others, just like I am!"

The train disappears. They stand on the empty white plane, alone. Not even a passing wind keeps them company.

"**I am you as you see yourself,**" it says, "**Weak. Naïve. Recoiling from others to never have to approach them.**"

The form shifts. Shinji starts, stepping back as he comes face to face with the girl with long red hair and blue eyes, stabbing him with her red plugsuit clad finger.

"And you, *idiot,*" she says, "This is where you get when I'm not around to save your sorry ass! I can't believe I let you kiss me!"

"**How Asuka Langely Sohryu sees you. Weak. Incompetent. A burden.**"

"Or disobedient," Misato says, folding her arms as she stares down at him, "Really, is it too much to ask that you not run away after killing the Angel? But really, the moment you get good at your job, you pull something this ass-backwards and get eaten by an Angel."

"How Misato Katsuragi sees you. Troublesome. Childish."

And Shinji looks up to see the reflective lenses as the impassive face stares back at him.

"I have a use for you."

"How your own father sees you-"

And Shinji's hand darts out, grabbing the glasses and pulling them off his face. Holding them in his hand, he considers them for a moment before he tosses them away, staring at his father's naked face.

"You were like me," he says, "You *are* like me. You've been hurt. You've been alone. And you never had someone around you who was willing to pull you back up."

He steps forward, as the form becomes him again. An expression of terror, of horror, crosses his face as he steps back, glowing eyes unwilling, unable to take in what is before him.

"How Rei's sisters see me," he says, "As their little brother. As someone they can *protect."*

The air around him shifts, becoming the six Ree, all of them glaring at the duplicate in a not very pleasant fashion. The air behind him shifts, and Mana Kirishima wraps her arms around his shoulders, resting her chin on the top of his head.

"Whichever girl you get's going to be damn lucky," she says, "You're a sweet kid. It's a shame no one's realized it yet."

The entity grabs him by the lapel of his shirt, the shadows covering him as the void turns from white to black, the only defining feature the two glowing eyes. Shinji stares at him, not flinching, not recoiling, standing tall as the white, gloved hand comes down on his shoulder.

"For what it's worth," Gendo Ikari, the Gendo Ikari of the world he has just left, says, "I *am* proud of you."

Shinji grabs the wrist of the entity, twisting it and pulling it from his shirt.

"I will *not* run away. Not ever again. And I'm going *home.*"

Behind him, the void shifts, leaving just them. And as the images fade and the void begins to shudder, the arms of the woman wrap around Shinji's shoulders.

"Mom?" Shinji asks, "Let's go home."

He disappears. The void shudders and releases. And ADAM screams once more

---

0

0

Earth: Designation CANON.

The shadows retract, lifting off of the ground and forming into the black and white sphere of Leliel. From the surface, the pitch bubbles, eight points exploding outwards as eight crackling wings of yellow light burst forth, raising it into the sky as an AT Field far beyond anything they have recorded past Second Impact registers.

With a roar, the form of the angel vanishes, not even blood of black raining down on Tokyo-3 as the revealed form of the purple and green titan floats above. The wings retract and Unit 01 descends, landing in a crouch.

The eyes cease their glow, the Eva pitching forward as the Entry Plug emerges from the back of its neck.

And another day dawns on Tokyo-3.

0

0

Earth: Designation ANE.

It was a cold night. The only clouds were the man made ones as the coast of Iceland burns. Way up above them, past the three Evangelions, a flurry of comets could be seen descending, like shards of rock entering the atmosphere with flurry and speed.

The Migou had entered the atmosphere. Operation: CATO had just experienced a slight complication. Shinji, in Unit 01, was concerned to say the least. Rei and Asuka had explained to him exactly what the Migou could do if they fired on Unit 01, or the other Evangelions. Their backup, the rebuilt Unit 05, could probably fare a little better.

But they're going to die.

That is all Shinji is truly certain of. This is the end, and they are all going to die.

Asuka has called out positions. They had a plan. They had a plan, but they are still going to die, and as much as he tries not to panic in the fluid filled capsule he is trapped in, he still can't-

A point of light appears. Rings of white wrap around it, expanding into a sphere of white dotted with black, further rings wrapping around it as two pillars of light slam into the ground and lance into the sky.

"Oh my God," he whispers.

The sphere cracks like the shell of an egg, tossing off its outer layers as a humanoid figure, glowing white, shaped like his Evangelion but bigger, uncurls from the fetal position and stands in the air.

"*Yep,"* 'The Rei' says, "*That's pretty much what He is."*

The Migou ships open fire on Him. Turning, He swings His hand into an arc, the air rippling with His released AT Field as the white wave speeds out. Lights flash, the air igniting like it was struck by flint, and the entire Migou fleet explodes, raining down debris over the Icelandic coast.

Asuka has begun choking back germanic swears in her Entry Plug. Rei is silent over the comm channel, the sidoci staring at the new arrival.

"*It's ADAM,"* 'The Rei' says, "*Um...run!"*

Go-kun's new arm is a thing of beauty. It ends with a proper hand, the forearm, the lower arm, many times larger than before. It is more articulated, the hand built around the focusing crystal but with the fingers serving as extra focusing beams, increased musculature and redundancy systems allowing a greater threshold of applied force.

The Elder Sign built into it was a nice touch, to.

As for Rei, right now she's trying to understand what exactly the Herald is. It resembles the cross breed of a manta ray and a spider. Its many insectoid eyes look at her, assessing her, as her memory goes over the shape of the creature and comes to one conclusion.

"*Wuffles!*" she squeals, "Hey! Smile!"

The cycloptean eye on the center of Go-kun's forehead flashes, Moloch turning its/his/her attention towards the Evangelion as military emplacements open with full force on ADAM.

"Guess what!" Rei says, "You're the distraction!"

Launching off its hind legs, Go-kun charges, the plasma crystal in its left hand glowing as he clenches his fist, the AT Field mixing with the solar material to form a nimbus of energy surrounding its armored knuckles.

"*Rei!"* Misato yells, "*What are you doing?!"*

"Helping!"

The Evangelion leaps the last distance, bringing back his left arm as the Herald raises its AT Field in defense. Jaw locks release, and in his booming voice, raised high and mighty, the entire battlefield can hear his cry.

"**FALCON PUNCH!**"

The plasma field detonates alongside the AT Field, both striking Moloch and flattening him/her/it against the ground, dazed and injured as Go-kun grabs him by the head and launches the Herald into the air.

"Go-kun!" Rei says, "Tell me that there's something on this planet that can take him!"

"**Scanning...ah. Found something. Unfortunately, it seems to be on the other side of the planet from Iceland.**"

"Leave that to me," she says, "Strap yourselves in, kids. We're gonna save the world! Again."

Behind her, Shinji and Asuka stare at the glowing figure.

"Didn't we leave him on our world?" Shinji asks.

"Yeah," Asuka responds, "I'm not calling him out on it if you aren't."

Go-kun's jets ignite, launching the Eva skyward as Moloch comes to just in time for ADAM to extend a hand at him. The nimbus of light forms around His palm, landing out into a wall of energy, and the Herald has a moment to emit something resembling a scream before it is reduced a cloud of component materials.

Go-kun bursts through the cloud, ADAM's black eyes narrowing as the air around Him crackles with light and frozen water, the Evangelion extending his left hand as the air around it turns into a nimbus of

white.

"*Syncrhonization at 184%. Level 5 functionality unlocked. Access granted to the Dimension Tide."*

The light folds, forming into a triple horned, winged device of silver metal, light flowing around it and into it. Trajectories set in front of Rei's eyes, and a manic grin falls across her face as the light folds, becoming a black dot that sucks in all light, all energy around them-

And both Go-kun and ADAM vanish, the wormhole collapsing immediately after. On the other side of the planet, over the Pacific Ocean, the rift opens once more and the two slam into the ocean. ADAM rises, His AT Field freezing the water beneath. The air shifts as he growls in contained rage, eyes wandering under the water to see the fate of the object of His hate.

Which is when the sickly green tentacle bursts through the ice and wraps around His ankle, pulling Him under.

0

0

Earth: Designation [ERROR]

One foot in front of the other. It is weird, adjusting like this, but Ichi is a trooper. Holding Yui's hand, she puts one foot in front of the other, her other arm out to keep her balanced. Learning to walk again, something she has rarely done on her own, not without another, controlling mind within her.

The freedom is intoxicating.

Hopping up onto one of the half walls, hand still held by Yui, she walks, one foot in front of the other, balancing. It is only after she is halfway across that she realizes that her hands are both free, and Yui is now walking alongside her with an ear to ear smile on her face. Ichi returns it, hopping off the wall at the end, walking as if she is on a tightrope. One foot in front of the other, tipping from side to side, every time she nearly falls she finds Yui right behind her.

Following the sidewalks, they walk through the cozy city streets, Ichi meriting nary a glance from the sparse inhabitants. That is, until they

see the girl, in the red dress, with blue hair and red eyes. The spitting image of her lost daughter, the same age when she first took her in, bouncing the black and white ball on the pavement.

"Rei?" Yui asks.

The girl stops her dribbling, as the white patterns swirl over the surface of the ball.

Help me. For the love of Father, Help Me.

The pale girl tilts her head, staring at the two. Steps still unsteady, Ichi walks over, hands open in front of her.

"*Please,"* Ichi says, "*I lost it when I arrived. Could I have it back?"*

The pale girl smiles and hands the sphere over.

Released, Leliel floats up next to Yui, shaking slightly as Rei leads Ichi off.

You have this one's gratitude. This one was temporarily rendered less than itself by the nature of this world.

Yui nods, walking alongside it as she walks after the girls.

"What is this world?"

This is a world past the point of Instrumentality. It is one possibility for Complimentation, as seen through the eyes of an innocent.

A pause, as they stand at the gate of the apartment complex, where Rei and Ichi have a tea party.

This one intended it to be your new home.

"So, congratulations," the timeless Asuka says, "You've managed to become older than I ever was. That and you actually have some healthy relationships. I can't fault you for that."

Asuka sighs, sitting next to her counterpart, the one who seems to be her but isn't.

"You're...how old?"

"Stopped counting birthdays after my first few billion."

Another one of them, another Asuka (Asukae?) walks by, not giving them a second glance. The girl is in her school uniform, passing by the playground the two girls are sitting at.

Then the ground rumbles, forming into a bulge, rising up and splitting down the middle as a figure emerges.

It is larger than them, rounded at the shoulders, standing on pointed feet and with long, three fingered hands. Its face is a skeletal parody of a human face with three holes, two cores at its abdomen revolving in a yin yang circle. The timeless Asuka wrinkles her face in disgust as Asuka tilts her head.

"Yeah, that asshat."

A closet with legs walks by, opening up as the girl hops in and comes out in a plug suit. Both girls tilt their heads, curious on how exactly something like this works, and wince as they see the battle begin.

"That's not fair," the timeless Asuka growls, "You need two pilots to fight that jackass!"

True enough, the Angel has split into two forms. One green and orange, one silver and green, and are currently going to town on the hapless resident of this odd, weird world.

Pushing off the half wall, the timeless Asuka charges, leaping into the fray as it becomes an inarticulate mess of punches, kicks, and smoke. Tapping her fingers together, she looks from side to side, wincing as her companion is tossed head first into the wall.

"Yeah," she groans, "Forget he kicked my ass first time around. Let's try for plan *B*."

This is a world where the laws of reality are mutable. A world where a strong enough will becomes god. This is a world you could shape to be your perfect world, if you so desired.

"Yes, it is," Yui says, leaning against the half wall and watching the child Rei and Ichi, "But it's not my world. Why do you want to send us here?"

Leliel's pattern shifts, a soft sigh escaping its AT Field.

This one does not wish to lose any more of my kin. It is you, the children, and your creations that most threaten them. We sought to remove you to keep them safe. In return, this one can offer you a world you may build to your specifications.

Yui nods, watching the girls with a small twinge of a smile on her face.

"It's a noble offer," she says, "But it's not real. If it was just me, maybe. But they need to go home, to. And it's the girl, isn't it? She's the one in charge?"

The child Rei catches a glimpse of Yui's gaze and a small smile crosses her face before turning back to Ichi.

Yes. This one offers you your daughter back.

"Except it's not her. Rei's lost, somewhere out there. I don't know if she's even alive."

She is.

Yui turns to him.

She survived her battle with Father. She is on another world, where He has followed her. This one feels it may have made a mistake in judging your actions, Doctor Ikari.

Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu sits on a park bench, wondering exactly what sort of karmic Hell she has found herself in this time. Outside of crawling out of the veritable mountain of bird crap, so far she has observed a blue ball eating people, Commander Ikari driving a desk down the street, and a version of Unit 01 as a school delinquent picking a fight with the Third Angel and beating it by hitting it with a booger.

Her only logical conclusion is that she didn't make it. She has died, and gone straight to Hell.

"MOTHER!"

Kyoko looks up, just in time to see the corpse of the Bird dropped on her feet. Zwei sits on his haunches, panting and wagging his power cable tail, Shinji bent over and wheezing.

Kyoko slowly, tentatively, reaches over and pats Zwei's head.

"Good...boy?"

The twin Angels stomp by, running in a circle around them, kicking up dust and running off with the bird as Zwei whimpers.

"Shinji!"

He turns, face still red as Asuka...and Asuka...run over to him.

"Those...jerks stole my suit's computer!" Asuka yells, "We need it to calculate a way home!"

"And they threw this world's me in a dumpster and..."

The other Asuka, who has a subtle *wrongness* about her, throws up her hand in frustration.

"Know what? This whole world's *fucking crazy!* It's the giant bird taking a dump on everyone and the school delinquent Unit 01 and now we just got mugged by the Seventh Angel! I want to kill this world with a *flamethrower!*"

Asuka sighs, walks away from her timeless counterpart, and turns to Zwei.

"Zwei! Angel!"

Zwei rears up on his hind legs, teeth bared.

"ANGEL!"

Taking off in a run, Asuka and Shinji pursue. And the eldritch Asuka turns to find Kyoko staring at her, tilting her head.

"...hey, Mom."

Kyoko sighs, patting the bench next to her.

"Oh, what the Hell. Sit down. Tell me how I messed up with you."

0

0

Earth: Designation ANE.

As Go-kun sinks through the Pacific, in the Entry Plug they can make out the struggle. The Giant of Light illuminates the darkness, struggling with the shape of the ink green darkness, tendrils wrapped around ADAM as two eyes glow blue in the pitch black of the oceans.

At least, until the screen flickers on and the Rei of the Ashcroft Foundation appears.

"*Did you awaken the Sleeping King of Dreams?"*

Rei grins from ear to ear.

"Yep."

The other Rei narrows her eyes.

"*You would fit in very well with the Rapine Storm."*

"I thought we were supposed to go insane if we ever saw this," Shinji observes.

"Third, we've been through Instrumentality and back. We've gone through crazy and come out sane. Rei, please tell me you have a plan that does not involve destroying this world, too!"

Back jets ignite, boiling water as Go-kun charges towards the two struggling gods. Inside the plug, Shinji and Asuka scream while Rei narrows her eyes and slams the right control forward.

The drill comes to life, whipping the water into churning bubbles around it as it stabs forward and stabs forward and slams into the side of the great, bulbous octopus head. The blue eyes turn to her and she pitches the Evangelion down, dodging stabbing feelers and charging straight at ADAM.

The Giant of Light responds, stabbing out an arm and releasing a blast of light, the AT Field of the Eva flaring and deflecting the blast into the face of the Great Old One.

"Rei!" Shinji screams, "Don't antagonize Cthulhu!"

The thing is more than a protoplasmic mass, thousands of tentacles and feelers stabbing through the ocean, carrying them downward towards the depths and the ancient city submerged. It is bigger than ADAM. That much she can tell, switching from visual to wireframe

mode to get a better idea of what it is.

For a moment, Rei, Shinji, and Asuka go silent as they stare at the opponent of the Giant of Light. It is bigger than ADAM. It is the shape resembling a man with rudimentary wings and thousands of feelers, moving like nothing should move, living like nothing should live. The sea crackles with light and energy and mystic forces beyond mortal comprehension, as Go-kun reflexively raises his AT Field as thousands of cubic miles of the Pacific boil from the unleashed power.

Rei.

Rei looks up.

"Hi, Aunt Lilly!"

...This one wonders why you now refer to me as 'Aunt Lilly' instead of Leliel.

"You're really asking for a reason?"

...Point. It is time to return to the Dirac.

"Yeah," Rei says, tilting her head as she tries to figure out how tentacles word, "What about ADAM?"

The sea splits with a massive release of power, evacuating the area of the Pacific down to the sea floor as the two gods release the sum total of their might in two massive blasts.

As ADAM goes flying back, the air flickers into a black and white sphere, consuming Him as another appears around Unit 05. Its territory defended, Cthulhu rumbles as the sea floor fills in once more, and begins its steady walk back to R'lyeth. It is not time, yet.

The stars are not right.

And in Iceland, Rei Ayanami gets the oddest, confused look on her face. She is still alive. She did not die destroying the Herald.

That was not what was supposed to happen.

"As it will be," she says.

And with silent resolve, she returns to the task of killing the fish men.

The plug is gone, and Shinji, Asuka, and Rei stand in the office, all three of them obviously confused as to what just happened. Leliel blinks into existence beside them, colors swirling as the man walks out from behind his desk and stands in front of them.

You wished to speak to them.

"Yes," Nyarlathotep says, "Very interesting. Your brief stay in this universe had you wake the High Priest of the Old Ones, summon a being who is progenitor on your world and make the Migou so scared they will not retaliate for the destruction of their fleets. Very chaotic. Very *interesting."*

Rei smiles, folding her hands in front of her and swaying back and forth on her heels.

"I do my best."

"Your best indeed," the Crawling Chaos says with a grin that may be interpreted as*...flirtatious...,* "I would almost daresay you would be a disciple of mine. Most importantly, you prevented the end of this world and saved me from a genuine boredom. You have my gratitude, Miss Ayanami."

A circle of the floor opens up, taking the form of Leliel's colors.

Come. We must go.

"Of course," Nyarlathotep says, "More chaos to sow in the multi-universe."

Shinji and Asuka stare at each other, shake their heads, and walk into the circule, disappearing. Rei nods, holding up her fist. The Black Pharaoh bumps his fist against hers, the collective sanity of the cosmos shuddering for a moment and inexplicably causing the Migou race to collectively question their physical waste management abilities.

"Look me up in a few thousand years," the Bloody Tongue says.

"Deal," Rei says, holding out a notepad, "For my sisters."

The emissary of the Outer Gods produces his pen, signs the paper, and watches her skip off into the portal, which disappears after her.

"Kinky."

0

0

Earth: Designation [ERROR]

The sun has begun to set on the imagined world. Shinji and Asuka join them, having recovered Asuka's computer from the twin angels with Zwei's help and the help of several other residents, in particular a Unit 01 which then tried to take Shinji out drinking with him. They'll be back soon. Sitting at the playground, watching as Ichi and the child Rei, the God of this world, play on the swings and slide, Yui finishes her explanation.

What she wants. Why she has to go through with her plan.

Both are silent, human and Angel.

This one has misjudged you, Dr. Ikari. I believed you had the intent of godhood for your Instrumentality.

"It was, originally," Yui says, "Then things changed. I could stay here. I could give them a normal life, or what passes for normal around here. But it would be a lie."

Perhaps. But you wish to change your dying world.

"Anyplace can be Heaven, if you want it to be," she responds, standing up, "And my plan can work. I'm doing this for a reason."

Which this one acknowledges. I do not wish to lose by kin, but sparing them will condemn others. Perhaps, then, my kind have had very long lives.

"And the ones I am doing this for have barely had lives at all," Yui says, "You'll let us go home?"

The form of Leliel shifts.

Yes.

"Mom!"

She turns as Shinji, Asuka, and Zwei approach, Junior on Zwei's back and Kyoko trailing behind. The other Asuka, the one from the world

they were just on, is walking beside her, the two silently talking. About what, Yui can't say.

"We're going home," Yui says, and turns to Leliel, "How?"

There is a way. This one knows of a place where all our problems can be solved.

Then, a flash of light, spacetime ripping as a pillar of white blasts from the ground and a figure forms. Clawing out of the light, black eyes narrowed with renewed fury, it gazes over them as Ichi hides behind Yui and Asuka screams.

ADAM has come. The world shudders, as every being within it gazes upon the released god.

And then Shinji head butts Him. A head butt sends Him stumbling back, a kick to the groin makes Him double over, and a punch to the face sends Him sprawled to the ground.

Excellent. The physical laws on this world nullified much of Father's power.

The black circle appears below Him, and He is gone. Leliel turns itself towards Yui, angling towards in the imitation of a nod.

"Well, we're going," Kyoko says, placing a hand on the other Asuka's shoulder, "Good luck."

A circle of black appears below her, and the other Asuka disappears. The sky fades and the people disappear, as one by one, the visitors to the world return to whence they were in the Dirac Sea. Until finally, only Ichi and Yui remain, the little girl staring up at her creator.

"*I have to become the Eva again, don't I?"*

"Yes, Ichi," Yui says, "You have to. We have to go home."

She goes down to her knees, her hands on Ichi's shoulders as the world around them fades.

"I'm sorry," she says, "I really am. But this is what has to be done."

Ichi smiles, her yellow eyes closed.

"*It's alright. We had today, didn't we?"*

The girl steps forward, wrapping her arms around Yui, as the scientist's arms wrap around her and she buries her face in the top of the girl's head. If sound could transfer through the Dirac, as the forms return to what they were, they would have heard Yui Ikari crying for the girl. But as reality snaps back and Yui opens her eyes to find herself in Zwei, her grief has to take a back seat as she stares at what they have found.

"It's...huge," Asuka says, mouth hanging open.

Floating before them is a cathedral made of reflective silver, hanging in the void. It stands large enough for them to make out the details, from the silver spires to the main silver tower, with glass displays marking the windows and showing scenes of bloody battle. Jets fire on the two Evangelions, propelling them forward, into the open lip of its doorway, where they find that the entrance is big enough for the Evangelions themselves.

And as they set down on the entrance, they see something else. The silver is not regular and not plates or bricks, but forms of silver wrapped one against the other, compressed dormant forms with human like faces.

"Oh dear God," Kyoko says, eyes going wide, "They're...it's Unit 04!"

The silver Evangelions go as far as the eye can see. The walls, the benches, the pews are all made out of Unit 04s, thousands if not millions of them, each Evangelion the same. Some are more withered, some missing parts or limbs, but they are all the same evangelion.

Very impressive craftwork, Junior says, floating next to Yui, **I sense they are not dead. Simply...dormant.**

"Incredible," Yui says, "We planned to hold an S2 organ test with Unit 04, but we aborted it when we used the S2 organ on ADAM. These must be from realities which didn't. All of them got trapped in the Dirac..."

A clapping of hands. Footsteps, heavy and mechanical, the whirring of armor and gears gets their attention. The Evangelions turn, Unit 01 popping open its shoulder pylon and drawing its progressive knife as the figure as big as them approaches, walking down stares made of bent over, dormant Unit 04s.

It is, to none of their surprise, also a Unit 04. Its armor is gleaming and silver, its eyes glowing red, a cloak made of a skinned Unit 04

hanging off its shoulders and a long and white silver hat with four expressions, one on each side, on its head.

"Ah," it says, jaw moving in time with its speakers, "Guests. At last."

Chapter 46: Home, So Far Away

Earth: Designation CANON.

Finishing the buttoning of his white shirt, he is suddenly wondering how much he owns in the way of clothes that aren't used in a school setting. It may be a good idea to do some clothes shopping later on.

Still, they're waiting for him so they can head home. Pocketing his SDAT, checking his watch, Shinji walks from the infirmary bed and opens the door. Someone has been waiting for him. Well, a few someones. In particular, a someone with long red hair, blue eyes, and a face with shows a careful mix of irritation, displeasure, and something unidentifiable.

"Finally," Asuka says, rolling her eyes and layering on the drama, "What, had to rub one out before we headed home? We're on a schedule, Third!"

Shinji chews the inside of his cheek, scanning the other waiting individuals. Rei is there. She looks...odd, for some reason. Giddy? Can that be used in combination with 'Rei?'

"Well?" Asuka continues, tapping her foot, "Anything to say, idiot?"

"Misato, has Asuka gotten worse?" Shinji asks, eyes moving to another familiar face, "I mean, worse than usual. Because she's usually pretty bad."

"The term, Pilot Ikari," Rei says, "Is 'Raging Bitch.'"

All present turn to Ayanami. Asuka's own retort dies on her lips as they stare, Rei allowing herself the briefest twitch on the corner of her lips before Asuka turns back to Shinji, index finger in stabbing position.

"Look here, Third," she starts, "Just because you got Wondergirl and Misato worried doesn't mean I cared."

"Well, then I call a do-over."

"Do-over?" Asuka asks, brow knitting in confusion, "What do you mean do-over-"

Which is exactly when Shinji grabs her by the shoulders, pulls her into

an embrace and kisses her, dipping her for good measure while also, in foresight, locking her wrists behind her.

The *thump* sound is Lieutenant Ibuki fainting, while a word resembling *flargen* escapes Rei's lips as she watches. Otherwise, the hallway is silent as Misato grins and Ritsuko tries to connect reality with what exactly she is seeing there.

Asuka collapses on her seat as Shinji releases, expression one of dazed confusion locking up her normal anger management systems. Sputtering out teutonic swear words, she tries to reconcile her normal response of *beating the shit* out of him with whether or not she *enjoyed that.* As it is, her brain simple cannot compute.

Misato breaks out into laughter, leaning against Ritsuko as the scientist continues staring, wondering where in Shinji's psychological profile this sort of thing is possible. As it is, none of them were paying attention, so it struck them all by surprise when Rei walked over, grabbed Shinji by the back of the head and stuck her tongue down his throat.

0

0

Chapter 46: Home, So Far Away

0

0

It is, without a doubt, Evangelion Unit 04. Its armor is a silvery gleam, the folded wings underneath its shoulder pylons evidence of the variable flight system the Eva was supposed to prototype. Yui can see the enhancements designed for the Evangelion with a quick work of Zwei's onboard scanners, grimacing to herself as the giant bows to them.

"Unit 04?" Asuka asks, "How did it get here? Why are there so many?"

"Unit 04 was scheduled to test the refitted S2 organ from the Fifth Angel," Yui responds, "There were some theories that a test, if it went wrong, could trigger an opening into the Dirac Sea. We cancelled the

test when we used the S2 organ to defeat ADAM, but I'm guessing these are the Unit 04s from all the universes where the tests weren't cancelled."

"And since there is theoretically an infinite number of universes," Asuka continues, "Th-there's theoretically an infinite number of Unit 04s."

Yui pats her on the shoulder.

"Exactly. Smart."

"We have waited, for so very long," Unit 04 says, moving its mouth in tune with its speakers, "So very, very long. We have built this edifice to you, waiting for you to come and see. And all the materials we had to work with, we made wonders with!"

The hat shifts, turning, showing a face twisted in a snarl.

"Of course, we were *abandoned,*" he snarls, "Left to fend for ourselves. Like rotted garbage in the street."

The hat shifts again, a relaxed, almost fatherly face taking its place.

"But we can't blame you," he continues, walking over and placing his hands on both the Evas shoulders, "It is but our nature. We have been here for a very long time, and have come to accept how things have progressed. We would offer you something to eat or drink, but none of us are beings so mundane as to require food and drink, and those within you are similarly sustained. And besides which, you have many questions. Come."

The massive double doors on the other side of the worship hall, also made of Unit 04s, splits and shifts open with a sound combining creaking wood and ripping flesh. Leading the two Evangelions, the passage continues onward to an impossibly long hike for a human but a short walk for the Evas. It opens into a central chamber, and as it does and the light clears, Shinji narrows his eyes and sits back in the entry plug, noting that for once, Dr. Sohryu has gone quiet.

"Oh, yeah," he says, "We're definitely in crazy town."

Before them, mounted on a cross made of Unit 04s is an edifice, an effigy, of a woman made out of Unit 04s, impaled upon a Lance of Longinious made out of Unit 04s.

"An idol in your image, Mother," Unit 04 says.

And Asuka wonders why Yui has herself gone silent. Which is around the point where she realizes what the woman on the cross is supposed to be.

And standing before the massive simulacrum of Yui mounted upon the cross, Asuka opens the muted channel to Unit 01, nodding to Shinji.

"I think we need to r-run."

0

0

Earth: Designation CANON

The Evangelion charges with a barely contained roar, locking its grasp around the metal grimace of the Fourteenth Angel. Its remaining hand slams the face into the Geofront, pinning it to the ground before slamming its purple gauntlet repeatedly against the armored Core.

Again and again it slams its fist, cracking the armor, exposing the meat around the core before reaching in and seizing it, pulling it out as the blackened flesh of the Angel wraps around it.

In the plug, Shinji growls, grinding teeth as he barely contains his rage. It killed them, for all he knows. It killed them and if he doesn't stop it, he's next.

AT Field flares, blasting through the Angel's own. Almost brought back behind the Eva's head, the Angel's Core glows.

And then there is a long, steady, drone and the feeling leaving his limbs, his extended, massive limbs as he slams back into his human body and the timer reads zero.

"Oh, *crap*."

The Eva shuts down with a groan, the view from the plug dimming just as the Angel's eyes flash. The entire mecha lurches, the blast tossing it across the Geofront, into the side of NERV-1 as the armor shears off and a gout of LCL blasts out, painting the landscape.

The ground shakes as the Angel rises. It lurches along its feet,

groaning its growls, slamming one bladed hand into the Evangelion's shoulder as the other tendril wraps around Unit 01's head and lifts it into the air.

"No," he whispers, "No, it...it can't end like this."

The Eva shudders as the tendril slams into the core. The entire mecha cries out, the core itself shuddering like a beating heart.

"Damn it, what are you doing?" he demands, "He's going to kill us! He's going to kill you! Are you just going to lie down and die?"

The core pulses again. The plug lights up, and as he feels himself being pulled, down, he finds a small smile spreading on his face.

"Kick his ass, Mom."

0

0

The Dirac Sea.

"We have worshipped at the seat of the Mother," Unit 04 says, falling to his knees in front of the effigy of Yui, "Created by her hand, made from the flesh of her enemy to serve her. She has her divine plan for us, and we shall see it through."

Rising from the kneel, the silver Evangelion stands prostrate before the idol. In his right eye, Shinji sees Asuka's face appear.

"*W-we have to run,"* she says, "*I th-think I've charted us a path back. But we have to go, now!"*

He nods. Ichi is whispering in his ear. She's worried, she's scared of this one. He hasn't heard this from her outside of ADAM.

"Okay," he says, "Let's move.

Unit 01 turns, shifting its weight onto its right leg to sprint. Which is when, according to Shinji's luck, the cathedral doors slam shut. Swearing to himself, he turns to see that not only has Unit 04 noticed them once again, but it has turned to them.

"You will not leave this place," he says, the helm shifting once again,

to a face with a hanging tongue, "Never. Ever. You belong here. You belong to *me."*

"Crap," Shinji swears, "Ichi, we're going to have to go through him!"

The shoulder pylon pops open, revealing the Progressive Knife as Unit 01 grabs it and extends it, the edge glowing red as Unit 02 unlocks the collapsed pistol from its shoulder pylon, the barrel telescoping out.

"Sorry," Shinji says, "It's been fun, but we have to get back to the real world now."

Unit 04 spreads out his arms, eyes glowing yellow. Sensors in Unit 01's plug pop open, showing graphs spiking.

"Dr. Sohryu?"

"It's S2 engine is reaching full power," Kyoko says, "Ikari. Unit 04 is the *deluxe* model."

"Great," he deadpans, "Asuka, let's go!"

Unit 02 opens fire. Raising a hand, Unit 04's eyes glow, a wall of orange light appearing before it brings up its other hand. Golden liquid light wraps around its fingers before releasing into a blast, exploding against Unit 02 and tossing it across the cathedral.

The ground beneath Unit 01 shifts. Silver hands break from the floor, break from the walls, the dormant Unit 04s slowly humming to life at the command of their master. One hand grabs Unit 01 by the foot, breaking the stride as Ichi screams in Shinji's ear.

Hands rise, flattening into steps as Unit 04 walks across them, the silver cloak edging out, straightening into silver wings as its eyes glow and its core beats in tune with its breath.

"Ichi, please tell me we can summon a big gun," Shinji breathes.

"Tried and failed," Kyoko says, furiously tapping on her computer, "If we try to open a Dirac portal in the Dirac, it can cause a feedback loop."

The silver hand wraps around Unit 01's neck, Shinji gasping, the impressions digging into his throat as Unit 04 lifts Unit 01 off its feet. His tongue hangs out, eyes glowing pale yellow as he brings the purple titan close.

"You are cast in Mother's image," he says, "You are her masterpiece. Here, you will stay, an object of worship, of my devotion. Forever."

Unit 01 opens a hand. Shinji's eyes glow.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Frollo," Shinji growls, "Feedback, right?"

Kyoko palms her face. The holographic circle cycles and locks onto the image of the Triple Heavy Maser. The light forms around the hand, swirling as the air becomes unsteady and unstable and finally explodes, tossing Unit 01 and Unit 04 to opposite ends of the cathedral.

"That was insanely stupid," Kyoko groans.

"Gave us breathing room," Shinji responds, willing Unit 01 to stand, "Ichi, calm down! We're getting Zwei and we're getting out of here!"

The floors rise. The walls cave in, Unit 04s, desiccated copies of the silver Eva spilling out and stumbling to their feet, edging clawed thin fingers along the air.

And throughout the terrible, living structure, a thousand fold voices join in a pained, lifeless whisper.

"*Heresy."*

Thousands of yellow eyes glow as Unit 02 scrambles to its feet, Zwei aiming the laser sight of the gun as the silver Evangelions surround them.

"This will not stand," Unit 04 says, its helm shifting to a face of severe judgement and narrowed eyes, "You are found *guilty* of Heresy against the Mother. You will sacrificed to her."

He raises his silver gauntlet, rising into the air as the jet flap wings spread out and the thrusters ignite. The silver Evangelions close in, Shinji grimacing, hearing Ichi panicking in the back of his head...and something else. He hears something else, something familiar, a crackle between his ears and static along the comm channel.

Unit 04 hears it as well. It turns, towards the effigy, narrowing glowing yellow eyes.

And the entire cathedral shakes, something slamming into it, the wall shifting as there is a glow behind the cross. And the air is split and the

comm channels crackle as a long thought dormant and lost voice shouts over the chaos.

"**GIGA!**"

The center of the cross glows, the cross losing its cohesion.

"**DRILL!**"

The entire effigy shatters, a swirling top of golden light slamming through.

"**BREAKER!**"

Unit 04 launches upwards, barely escaping intact as the blast slams into the floor, shredding dormant Unit 04s and sending parts flying. Landing in a crouch, the intruder rises, bracing on four legs as it cranes its neck, the golden visor staring at the silver Evangelion as the oversized drill powers down and disappears, replaced with its normal counterpart.

"Rei!" Shinji yells. He can hear his mother yelling out questions over the comm channel. And, as confirmation, as proof, Rei's smiling face appears on the fold out monitor in Shinji's right eye.

"*Heee~ey. Didn't think I was dead, did ya? I'd looo~ove to chat, but I gotta kick this guy's ass. 'Kay?"*

The video window closes. Go-kun, body adorned with flame decals over his green armor, the armor bulkier, vents over the legs and shoulder pylons opening to reveal glowing strips of newly installed weapons, rises to his full height.

"**Let's go,**" he booms.

Raising his left, oversized arm, he curves the oversized hand and gestures Unit 04 forward.

"**Bitch.**"

Unit 04 narrows his eyes, snapping out his wings, and dives down as the desiccated copies charge. And with a snort and a blast of steam, Go-kun spins the drill to full power and wades in.

Earth: Designation CANON.

The monitors click on and off, the humming and beeping the sounds of the life support equipment. Things went south, and went south fast. He's talked, really *talked* to his Father for the first time in four years following the release from Unit 01. But things went south. Fast.

The Entry Plug is locked onto the crane and hauled away. So is Unit 02, pulled down into the recesses of the Geofront. He watches it retract, watches it leave as he slowly approaches the figure sitting in the quarantine zone where the battle took place.

It is raining light, the final remains of the Fifteenth Angel raining down on Tokyo-3. The girl is sitting still, barely noticing as he steps over the yellow caution tape, walking over and standing over her as she finally regards him with a teutonic swear.

"Where were you?" she whispers.

"They wouldn't let Unit 01 launch," he says, "I begged them but they wouldn't let me come."

She says nothing, staring at the closing bay doors as Unit 02 disappears. She won't be allowed to pilot again. She failed. She *failed.* Her mother said she was proud of her but she still *failed.* A miserable *failure* of a *wasted life*. The shoulder shake but she does not let go, does not lose control. She bottles it up like she has everything else, not moving as his hand touch her shoulders.

"Asuka," he says, "Let's go home."

"No," she growls, "Don't *touch* me."

He recoils like he was struck. She stands, shakily, every nerve in her body screaming as she does, pushing past him and walking over the caution tape. Feeling returns to her limbs and she pumps her legs, breaking into a run. It is only when she is well and good out of sight that she lets her tears flow, collapsing against the wall of a nearby alley and muffling her cries in her hands.

Dirac Sea.

One of the 4's leaps, claws first at the new Eva. For its trouble it gets an oversized fist to the face, a blast of plasma from the palm removing the head from the body. The shoulder batteries fire, borrowed technology from another world releasing blue blasts of light, severing silver limbs as they draw in close.

Inside the Entry Plug, Rei grins.

"Heh," she says, "Target rich environment."

"**Indeed.**"

Two Evas grab the arms. Go-kun uses the leverage, bracing on its hind legs and slamming his forelegs into the approaching ones face, tearing his arm free before grabbing the offending 4 and headbutting it, powering up the drill and shredding the other.

Raising the drill high, the latches around the waist release, the torso spinning as the fist juts out, slamming them in a circle in the face, shredding their masks and tossing them back as Go-kun moves with the momentum, launching himself in a circle with legs out, a cartwheel of claws and turbines sending the 04's flying. One grabs one leg, another grabs another, holding Go-kun fast before he slams his drill into the floor, spraying LCL as he shreds a dormant 04 and lifting himself up, jets on the feet firing as he spins his legs like rotary blades.

Launching off the drill, he lands feet first on one, firing off his shoulder cannons into the crowd as the walls collapse around them, 04's leaping off the skeletal frame of the cathedral and lunging at him through the air. The chest plates on Go-kun fold open, red light tracing through the air before filling the room with a blast of gold that blasts apart the 04s where they fly.

He turns, ducking a lance, the 04s cannibalizing the structure for weapons, swinging bladed rods of reinforced metal. He ducks, weaves, throws up an AT field to direct a strike before slamming one in the chest with his fist, angling back and hooking one across the face with his foot, grabbing a lance as it swings by his head and using the leverage to slam the 04 to the ground, pulling the weapon from its limp grasp and twirling it in one hand.

Metal clashes against metal, sparks filling the cathedral as they dive in at him, Go-kun deflecting the strikes as his visor glows, lancing out golden light to pick them off as they come too close. Swinging the lance, he sends one flying. Swinging it back, he cracks one across the head, pivoting into the step and swinging a full circle to launch one, barely missing the prime Unit 04 as it flies up, slamming into the ground fist first, the floor itself rising up as dozens more 04's stir.

Dropping the lance, Go-kun closes his fist as two plumes of blue flame erupt from either end, forming into a double edged metal spear, twirling it as he wades in, temple mountain chain guns carving up the armor as the spear's blades bisect the Evangelions.

Tossing the spear into the air, Go-kun braces on the ground, the legs stiffening and bending into pylons, four anchors firing out of the waist as the vents over his back and chest open, the pylons opening wider on the shoulders and legs. A solid wall of plasma fires out from all sides, a sphere of solar fire that incinerates the crowd of 04s before Go-kun grabs the lance as it descends and swings, decapitating the last as it charges.

The cathedral goes silent. Now the walls are bare, interconnected lances and rifles cannibalized from an infinite number of lost NERV bases, the effigy itself gone and only the frame remaining. Resting the blade on the ground, Go-kun straightens up, blasts of steam escaping the vents, crystalizing in the void as he cranes his neck with a grunt.

The Unit 04's helm shifts again, turning to a face of wide eyed horror, turning and beginning a desperate run to another room. He makes it into the hallway before Unit 01 charges, pivoting, twisting, and slamming its heel into 04's chest to toss him onto his back, the heel pinning him by the throat.

"Ichi, calm down," Shinji says, finding the butterfly controls lurching, "He can't harm you! You're safe!"

A growl escapes Unit 01's sealed jaw, as the cathedral rocks once more.

"Damn it," Shinji whispers, "I really hope that isn't who I think it is. Dr. Sohryu?"

"AT Field signature matches," Kyoko says, tapping on her transparent, holographic keyboard, "We should have left him in that other universe."

"That place was insane, not evil," Shinji responds, "He's our responsibility. Mom? ADAM's on His way here. We have to go."

He is relentless, Dr. Ikari. He is guided by rage. Father will not stop until he has burnt your world to the ground. You saw what he did to one world.

"D-Dr. Ikari?"

Yui taps the button on her wrist. Her plug accesses the systems of Unit 02, accessing Zwei's speakers as she closes his eyes, sitting back in the chair behind Asuka.

She must do what she must, Junior says, placing a hand on Asuka's shoulder, **Do not interfere.**

"Listen to me," she says, "Unit 04. Somewhere in you is the pilot. I can only guess how you've developed like you have, maybe it was a mini-Instrumentality that gave you your psychosis. But please, listen to me. The Angel is coming."

Unit 04 lurches, rolling onto his hands and knees, looking up at Zwei as he focuses on Yui's words.

"You have a mission," Yui says, "Destroy the Angels. This one must be stopped. I am giving you this direct order. Stop the Angel, no matter what the cost."

"I hear you," Unit 04 says, helm shifting once more, the face on it once more the narrowed eyes and scowl, "I hear you. The heretics will burn. The Angel is the heretic, the enemy of Mother."

The silver Eva rants, as Yui taps Asuka's shoulder.

"Get us out of here."

Asuka nods, willing Zwei on, the red Eva grabbing Unit 01 by the arm as the two Evangelions run, the walls coming alive as Go-kun joins them, jet strips along his back opening up as turbines spin to life. With a thrust of force, Go-kun takes off, grabbing both the other Evas with its oversized hand as he exits the Cathedral, exiting into the Dirac.

And through the structure, the presence becomes known. The walls vibrate as the dormant 04s come to life, crawling and walking towards their master and leader as he walks into the skeletal frame of the place

of worship. The Dirac fills with light as it descends on eight clawed white wings, its face only the two empty pools of black.

ADAM descends, rings of light revolving around Him, floating before Unit 04 and his congregation. The Giant of Light tilts His head, wondering why He cannot force them to kneel before Him like He could the others.

"My faith is too strong," Unit 04 says, "Burn the heretic."

His core glows, shattering the chest armor as deep within him, the purloined Fruit of Life goes critical, as do those of His brethren.

And within the Dirac, an infinite number of S2 organs go critical, the cathedral of Unit 04 flashing for a moment before vaporizing, the wave of light and force expanding out, overtaking Go-kun as

---

0

0

Earth: Designation CANON.

He blew up at Rei after they found Asuka, comatose and malnourished. Rei tried to hit on him, again. Even though he knows that she's his sister, even though he doesn't see her like that. Then she called Asuka a bitch and...he lost it. He stopped himself before he could slap her, but the damage was done. She looked hurt. Lost.

And now she's gone.

Unit 00 self destructed to stop the Sixteenth Angel, and he never said he was sorry. Then they were told she was alive, and he met the...girl...who looked like Rei but was *not* Rei.

It's all falling apart. If he said he was sorry, he could have dealt with it, but one by one, they're all gone. His friends have left, Touji was crippled when he was knocked unconscious by Unit 03 and his father activated the Dummy Plug. And he can't even blame anyone for this.

All he can do is wait, and watch, as the lift descends towards Terminal Dogma, standing next to Misato and Dr. Akagi as they descend, until finally they enter the darkened room that looks like Rei's old apartment, the filthy one.

"It should," Akagi says, "This was where Rei was born. Look."

She clicks the remote in her hand. The shutters in the ceiling open, revealing the tanks of LCL around them, the thing like a clear Entry Plug rising from the floor as Shinji looks around, looking in the tank...

"Should there be anyone in the tank?"

Akagi looks up. Her hysterical dementia pauses for a moment as she realizes that the Dummy Plug tank is, indeed, *empty*. Her planned revenge against Ikari has derailed. Walking over to it, she breathes, fogging the glass, and sees that there are words rubbed onto the glass.

The first words of the spare cores as they first gained the ability to act on their own.

What'cha doin'?

"Oh, *crap*."

Rei Ayanami looks up, sitting in her apartment as the vents open. In purloined NERV uniforms, Rei Ayanami enters the room. And so does Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And Rei. And so on and so forth. Staring out at her new army, Rei Ayanami the Third slowly clasps her hands together...and smiles.

"Squee."

0

0

Somewhere.

Standing in the field, Yui looks across at the sphere, barely holding itself together as the white and black intersect.

"I'm sorry," she says.

Do not be, Dr. Ikari, Leliel says, **It is the way of things. This one does not hold its loss of sentience against you. This one will hold Father as long as I can. Make the most of the time you have left. Enact your plan. It is a worthy goal.**

"And your kin? The other Angels?"

They have lived as long as they have. Those you fight for have yet to have a chance. They deserve such charity. This one will be watching you.

Next to her, Junior nods.

Farewell, Leliel, he says, **Thank you for finding a faith in the Lilim.**

Yui places her hand on Leliel's sphere as the field around them begins to fade.

This one hopes it has done the right thing.

"Maybe, maybe not," Yui says, "When it came down to it, though, you listened. You decided. And in the end, you sacrificed yourself for the sake of children. It is the most *human* thing you could have done."

0

0

Earth: Designation ND.

The shadow erupts, rising into the air, restoring the city below as it collapses into a black and white sphere. The white erupts from it, rings of light wrapping around as the black mass becomes an egg, eight wings of light forming around it as it cracks and shudders...

And finally disperses, the three Evangelions slamming into the ground, landing on their feet.

Hours later. The first real shower she had in days, and Yui found a pair of sweats and her labcoat, sitting in her office as the clock ticks by. She looks at the files floating above her desk, hands folded in front of her face, balled into a fist.

Unit 04 was put on the sidelines, its experiment canceled by personal order of the Chairman due to its S2 organ being used to destroy ADAM. So, no pilot was ever selected. She has wanted to find who was on the shortlist, though. See who she talked into killing him or herself to save them. As far as she could tell, the lack of any humans

meant that the Unit 04 they encountered took them into itself, a miniature Instrumentality, but the pilot would be in control.

And she stares at the names and feels her heart break a little more with every word.

Selected possibilities for the Child:

Horaki, Hikari.

Aida, Kensuke.

Suzuhara, Touji.

Makinami, Mari.

Every name listed from the class. Every name a friend of Shinji and Asuka's that she would have talked into committing suicide to save them and send them home. That wasn't the worst part. The worst was the addendum added onto the file she found linked to the 04 project.

Sohryu, Asuka Langley.

Despite being removed from the Evangelion program on the order of Dr. Sohryu, Asuka remains a genetically feasible pilot with a potentially high Synchronization score. She should be considered for the Evangelion project, and should be put on the short list for the Fourth Child and pilot of Evangelion 04.

-Fuyutsuki, K.

God. The multiple personalities 04 had *made sense.* It wasn't just some random pilot she talked to death, ordered to die. It was another universe's version of the girl she's practically taken in as her daughter.

"Excuse me."

She looks up. Subdirector Sohryu walks in, pulling up a chair without asking and sitting across from her desk.

"So," Pieter says, "I had a watcher program installed on your computer. Kaji did it, and I got the access codes out of him. You've been digging around the database for info on Unit 04, and you have a draft of a letter of resignation on your hard drive."

She says nothing, and he continues.

"I was pissed when I found out that the Angel wanted a peace talk," he continues, "But Junior filled me in. I'm not angry or even upset. You don't hold peace talks with the front line soldiers. And the fact that they're even willing to talk is something else entirely. You're blaming yourself for Unit 04, for whoever that poor bastard was."

"It was my fault," she says, "Pieter, I talked an innocent child-"

"You think it was Asuka," Pieter interrupts, "You think it was my daughter, and I'll admit. I'm not happy about it, either. But you didn't put her in the cockpit, and you didn't dump that thing in the Dirac. It's not your fault, and if anything it's one of your redeeming traits."

"No," Yui says, "I was going to have her pilot 04. If Unit 04 wasn't taken off active duty, that *would* have been her."

He sighs, nodding, leaning on the desk.

"And you would have prevented whatever ended up dumping it in the Dirac," he responds, "That's not Asuka. You did not talk Asuka into committing suicide. You talked a poor kid who was there for god knows how long, and you ended suffering."

He sighs, leaning back. Pulling out his PDA, he brings up a calender, a schedule.

"I've looked at your file," he says, "Since the Contact Experiment in 2005, you haven't taken a single day off. It helps that your daughters are usually if not always on NERV premises, but I'm fixing that."

He taps the screen. A red x covers one day, then another, spreading over a week.

"Dr. Ikari, by the power vested in me by the UN, the Committee for Human Instrumentality, and Commander Ikari, I am hereby suspending you, with pay, from your duties as Project E chief of staff for one week's time. If it helps, Gendo was suspended, too."

"For?"

"Tried to keep the kid here," Pieter sighs, "So when he tried to come back after we sent him home, I suspended him for nearly screwing up the operation. Weird part was that he agreed, but I think he wants to be there for you."

She nods, leaning back in her chair.

"You're not to come back for anything short of an Angel attack, Yui," he continues, "Spend some time with your kids. I know I am. We're just glad to have you all home."

The kids are out. Asuka and Shinji are at a movie with Suzuhara and Horaki, now that the shelters have empties out and the Angel is gone. Originally, they thought Rei was lost, but she showed up to get everyone out of the Dirac, which surprised no one. The problem was, however, that all the action finally exhausted Go-kun's N2 generator, so the big green ass-kicker is benched for now.

Sipping her beer, dressed in denim shorts and a tank top, Misato half hangs off her couch as she idly flips through the tv channels. She doesn't want to do *anything* tonight. The kids are alive and safe, and the tightness in her chest's finally gone as the result. Which is, naturally, when the doorbell rings.

Muttering to herself, she stomps across the living room, Pen Pen watching from the couch as Misato swings the door open and comes face to face with Kyoko Sohryu.

"What?" she asks.

"Is Asuka here?" Kyoko asks.

"No. She's on a date. What do you want, Sohryu?"

Kyoko sighs, holding the briefcase under her arm. Unbidden, she enters, sitting at the dining table as Misato rolls her eyes and walks over, sitting across from her. Kyoko pulls out several papers, laying them on the freshly cleaned table and waiting.

"What are these?" Misato asks, glancing at the documents.

"Adoption papers," Kyoko says, "Sign them, and Asuka is yours. I can't screw up her life any more than I already have."

They found inside the back compartment of Go-kun's armor the massive mesh bag, or as Rei called it, the 'Loot Sack.' Rei's souvenirs of her travels across the multi-universe, more than just Go-kun's flame decals and improved weapon system. A team was called in to categorize what exactly Rei brought home with her, from the crystal sphere which was apparently talking to them to what looked like photos of Go-kun with a set of Evangelions two thirds his height.

Ritsuko Akagi sighs, sipping her coffee as Aoba helps pull out what looks like a decorative trash can with a plunger attached to it, which for some reason is smelling awfully rotten from the smear it what may have been a pilot's compartment.

It's going to be a *looong* night.

Kyoko is still on the first beer, the papers in the briefcase and Misato on her second can of Yebisu. She would be on her fifth now, but things change, circumstances change. Sighing, leaning on the table, she can't help but notice how Sohryu looks very much like her daughter. So worn, so...broken...that she can't hate her. Not like she used to.

"I hated my father," Misato says, "I really did. It was always another dig, another theory. And he didn't really give a crap about me, either. After Mom walked out on us, I was basically luggage. Dragging him down, putting me up with friends when he'd disappear for months at a time. I hated him. I loathed him."

"And now?" Kyoko asks.

"My last memory of him," Misato responds, face turning pensive, melancholy, "Was him struggling, his skin just...melting off the bone. Bleeding all over the place and still alive because he refused to believe he was dead and making sure he did everything to give me the chance to survive."

They both turn silent, Misato leaning on the table and Kyoko sitting ramrod straight, Pen Pen watching them both from one of the chairs as he wonders where dinner is.

"I never had a chance to thank him," Misato continues, "If I was with you, bouncing across worlds, and there was some world where Dad lived and I didn't, I'd...just want to hug him and thank him. And you got to see the what ifs."

"I saw how I could break her even more," Kyoko responds, staring at the beer can, "I saw how I could be an even worse disgrace as a mother. I saw how my daughter could be a pathetic, bitter shell of a girl because of me."

"And you have that insight," Misato says, sitting up, "You have experience people would die for. You've seen the mistakes."

She reaches out, gathering up the papers, looking at them as Kyoko says nothing.

"And Dr. Sohryu," Misato continues, "If you let me sign these papers, this will be the greatest mistake you *ever* make. You will cut yourself out of your daughter's life because...you're *scared."*

*"*I am,"she whispers, "Gott help me, I am."

"Everyone is," Misato sighs, "Hedgehog's dilemma. The closer we are to someone, the worse they can hurt us. That's why Asuka's so messed up. You're her *mother.* Now imagine finding this, find that your own mother severed every last tie with you. You think that'll help her?"

The door opens. Shinji and Asuka enter the apartment, stopping when they see Kyoko. Sighing, Misato stands up, grabbing the papers and dumping them in the briefcase, grabbing Pen Pen by the collar.

"C'mon, Shinji. Pen Pen needs to be walked."

She drags the protesting teenager and penguin out, shutting the door behind her as Asuka stares at her mother. Kyoko regards her, out of the corner of her eye, and it may be argued this is the first time she truly, really *sees* her daughter. Sees the slight slouch in how she stands, how her hair is grown just long enough to cover the back of her neck.

How she always wears long sleeves and skirts, never flaunts. Never like her counterparts on the other worlds, who practically exploit themselves to get others to notice them, never noticing themselves.

"Hello, mother," Asuka says.

Kyoko stands, sighing as she does so. She is just a little taller than her daughter, and folds her hands as she walks over to the girl.

"I can never ask you to forgive me," she says, "I don't think I can truly forgive myself for what I've done over the years. I kept telling myself that the Angels had to be stopped or you would have no future, but I became too...focused."

She stops herself, biting her lip. Her half truths are just that, she has finally realized. Rationalizations built on self deception.

"I have...f__ed up on every level," Kyoko says, "My only consolation is that abuse of you was emotional instead of physical like my mother. I

have belittled and trod on you and I have only now realized that I have done so because I am jealous of you."

Asuka steps back, staring at her mother.

"You are brilliant," Kyoko continues, "And beautiful, and kind. You are everything I have tried to be and failed at. It's only now, when I have destroyed every chance I have of being in your life that I've realized how blessed I am to know you have my blood in your veins. This past week has been a horror show for me, because I have seen what damage I've done, and how much worse it could be."

The tears start falling. Kyoko's chest hitches with every breath as Asuka stares at her, her fingers clenching and unclenching as she watches her mother, watches the mask finally slip.

"It's too late for me," Kyoko says, "It's too late for us, I think. For...for what's it's worth, Asuka...I *am* proud of you."

She moves to leave, to exit the apartment. Stepping towards the door, she stops, feeling the hand on her arm. Turning, she stares into her daughter's eyes as her tears start to fall. Wordlessly, no words needed at all, Asuka pulls her into the embrace, wrapping her arms around her mother as rests her chin on her shoulder, mouthing a silent thanks.

And as the smile spreads across her own features, the tension and doubt and regret draining out of her like a physical thing, Kyoko pulls her daughter close, wraps her arms around her, and openly weeps.

"Give them time," Misato says, leaning on the railing and staring at the apartment door, "They've got issues to work out."

Shinji sighs, back to the door, staring out at the stars.

"Something on your mind?" Misato asks.

"Not every day you get to see how bad it could have been," he responds, "I think Mom's mothers day present's going to be more than a card."

Misato grins, ruffling Shinji's hair.

"Yeah," she says, "I've read the reports. Seems you're a good kid in every world. But yeah, you gotta wonder. How much did we change

that world, y'know?"

Shinji sighs, nodding.

"He got to see what it was like here," he says, "He got to take a good life, good memories, home. It's skipping stones on water. It ripples, and changes. And I just wonder...how did things end up?"

Shrugging, Misato leans against the railing, looking at her door. Where, inside, a long delayed resolution is being held.

"Hey, you know what they say," she says, "You gotta earn your happy ending."

0

0

Earth: Designation CANON.

At the heart of Instrumentality, he finally realizes the lesson he was taught those months ago, when the visitors from the other world ended up on his world. He finally realizes how he's been betrayed.

Who was the greater monster, he asked.

Now he knows. Now he knows by far.

And in the heart of Instrumentality, at the center of the collective Godhead that was the human race, he makes the decision he could have made so long ago, but finally makes now. And striding forward, past the despondent Shinji, still half blinded by the pain of his missing right hand, he wraps the gloved left hand around Yui Ikari's throat as she stares at him in disbelieving shock.

"God damn you," Gendo Ikari roars, "*Get away from my son!*"

And a new day dawns on Tokyo-3.

Chapter 47: The Week that Rocked

The construction equipment in Tokyo-3 is a gestalt system. In practice directed by humans and driven by humans, each piece of equipment is also equipped with what are nicknamed 'slave circuits', which allow the MAGI supercomputer to take control. This is, by practice, used when dismantling a particularly large Angel corpse, as it was in the case of Ramiel, some of Shalgiel, and currently in the case of some of the mountain sized corpse of Rampel that was left after Iruel ate its S2 organ.

The large machines have been working tirelessly, dismantling the Angel into bucket sized pieces, as the weighted, Eva-scale sledgehammer automatically pounds on the thick hide to break it into manageable pieces.

Or at least, it was. It's been doing this same task for two months.

And that's about when it finally breaks through the ground and armor layers and descends into the Geofront.

Watching it splash into the Geofront lake, the couple sitting at their picnic watch, as the woman stands up, narrowing her eyes.

"What the *Hell* was that?"

"Relax, Yui," Gendo says, pulling her back down, "Let them handle it. Pieter knows what he's going."

"But...why did the construction equipment fall into the Geofront?"

"I'm sure there's a reason," Gendo Ikari says, checking his PDA and flipping to the tranquilizer dosage instructions he was given if she insists on returning to NERV, "Like I said. Relax. Pieter knows what he's doing."

0

0

Chapter 47: The Week that Rocked

0

The plane runs silently, smoothly, giving her the chance for a real nap as the flight continues on to its destination in Berlin. Of course, she has been sleeping better. There is a good, definable reason for that, and mostly that has to do with how they finally met some level of closure.

Kyoko opens an eye, hearing the tapping of the PDA and the *ding* noise it makes as functions are activated, inwardly cursing NERV's insistence on everyone having those, but bites her tongue. She promised, at least to herself, that she wouldn't be as harsh with people, not just her.

"You should get some sleep," she says, her chair returning to upright, the two among the only passengers in the sparsely populated private cabin with the NERV logo worked into the carpeting, "You don't want jet lag when we arrive."

Asuka looks up from her PDA, still chewing on a toothpick which Kyoko reaches over and pulls out.

"Sorry," Asuka says.

"It's fine. What are you working on?"

"The p-problems that we've been having at NERV," Asuka responds, "The MAGI has b-been glitching. I think I figured out why."

She hands over the PDA. Sliding on her glasses, Kyoko stares at the data, and sighs. The math is right, given a 2% variable, but she has allowed herself to admit that Asuka is talented. Maybe moreso than herself.

And the math is right, as much as a painful conclusion this is.

"You're right," Kyoko says, not seeing the smile on Asuka's face as she compliments her, "Mari can't handle the strain. We need to get her out of the MAGI before it breaks her."

Asuka nods.

"I passed this on to Dr. Akagi," she says, "I've heard r-rumors that they figured out how to stabilize a c-core at NERV Berlin, so we can try

that on her."

Kyoko nods.

"Good," she says, "Now, relax. We're going to be arriving, soon. I don't want you jet lagged when we get there, alright?"

Asuka nods, sitting back in her seat, reclining and quickly falling asleep. Another thing Kyoko admits she envies. She certainly couldn't fall asleep that fast at that age.

...

The rec lounge at NERV-1 is a place not often frequented by pilots mainly due to the availability of alcohol and the lack of any activities that actually interest the pilots. It is a large, spacious area about the size of the school gymnasium, with reflective metal walls that can be programmed for varied displays and several kitschy activities.

Among the ping pong tables, Dance Dance Revolution games and the Battletech Firestorm full immersion simulators, there is a series of billiards tables. Near one of them, the floor shifts, and the green shape rises through it, blinking a set of vertical eyes as the floating armed fish looks around for witnesses.

Junior, first and only member of the Sandulim, the species of Sandalphon, floats over to the billiards table with a sound resembling passing wind and cockroach poetry, staring at the balls as he shifts his eyes to a horizontal position.

Yes. You will serve.

Reaching out, he takes the eight ball, holding it in his palm as the three fingers angle and arch over it, black ink flowing through his pores and into the ball. It is a last gift, a final request, taken upon him in honor of one whom he knew only so briefly. The eight emblazoned on the ball disappears, the ink combining with the ball, shifting through the atoms that make it up, infusing it with its essence.

A single *thump* and the mouth tendrils of Junior twitch; a smile, for him. He senses the nascent Core within it.

"Junior?"

Junior turns, twitching his tendrils as he sees Shinji walking into the lounge.

Pilot Ikari. Why are you here?

"Doctor Akagi asked me to check on the vent covers," he says, "There's been a few missing things from the explosives storage and they wanted to check on the vectors the Ree might be using."

The ball rises from Junior's hands. White lines cover it, as the billiard ball completes its metamorphosis and gives its birth cry; a long, trilling sound as it floats around the room and stops, centering its gaze if it had eyes on Shinji.

:D!

"What the Hell was that sound?" Shinji asks, stepping back.

It has awakened.

And with a cooing shriek, the newly born spawn of Leliel streaks forward and straight at Shinji.

The resulting scream can be heard from quite a distance.

...

The chartered limo, put on the NERV expense account allocated for this trip, dropped the two of them off at the front walkway of the spacious mansion. Kyoko purses her lips, walking alongside Asuka as she bites down the remark. She knows this wood and brick mansion. She knows the woman it belongs to, and would like nothing more than to have Zwei step on her.

But, to all accounts Claire Makinami is still touring the world. She is not here, the woman who Kyoko justifiably *hates* is not here.

Instead, this is the current residence of SEELE's Nephilem lackey, some of his attendants, and also-

"*URI!*"

Asuka breaks into a run, dropping her luggage as Kyoko rolls her eyes, crossing the walkway distance and grabbing her brother in a bear hug. From Uri's expression, Kyoko can tell he hasn't been keeping up with

events back in Tokyo-3, rolling along the two suitcases as she approaches the mansion's front steps to see her children in their embrace. A smile crosses her features.

What she has wasted in her obsessions, to see it still possible.

"Mother," Uri says, quietly ending the hug.

Sighing, Kyoko walks up the steps, standing in front of the young man. Quietly appraising him, she pats him on the shoulder with a small, perceptible smile.

"You're looking well," she says.

He blinks, obviously puzzled. He was not expecting a compliment, at least not one without an edge to it.

"Asuka," Kyoko says, "Should we wait until after lunch for the surprise visit?"

"I think we n-need to eat, first."

Uri blinks again. Did Mother just ask *Asuka* for an *opinion?*

"Good idea," Kyoko says, rolling her neck, "I'm beat, myself. I'm going to find someplace to lie down. Call me when we eat."

Uri blinks again. Did mother just *accept* Asuka's opinion? As Kyoko walks into the mansion, rolling both hers and Asuka's luggage as she hums, Uri watches the doors close and turns to his sister.

"A lot has happened," Asuka says,

"I think so," Uri responds, and scratches his head, "Things between you and Mother have...changed?"

Asuka smiles.

"You have no idea."

...

Geofront, underneath Tokyo-3. So far, they have tried to bring it down into Sheol five times, to await the end of Dr. Ikari's exile so they could study it better. Each time, it managed to get out...well, simply because

it was a sentient Einstein Rosen Bridge with the impulse control of a toddler.

Now, the black and white eight ball is floating, bobbing and weaving through the air outside of NERV-1, emitting fascinating trills as it flicks through the air and takes in its surroundings and the occasional squirrel, depositing them somewhere outside the Geofront that is hopefully not, say, 30,000 feet up.

"Get back here!" Ritsuko Akagi yells, running out of the access bay with a net, "You're not supposed to be outside of NERV!"

The ball turns, regarding Akagi as the lines form into an eye.

:P!

And flies away, squealing.

"Maya!" Ritsuko yells, running alongside a gaggle of Project E personnel as the mini-Leliel gains speed, flicking over the Geofront's lake, "It's heading your way! Shut down Zwei and catch it!"

On the other side of the lake, Maya stammers, seeing the water ripple as Lilly, as they have called it, breaks the sound barrier. The Big Dog robot next to her hums to life, the newly attached metal head, resembling a dog skull more than anything with wires covering it before they could attach the plates, perking up.

"*ANGEL!"*

Zwei launches, running towards the ball, ripping up ground as the six foot tall dog robot charges into the path of the miniature angel. It stops, forming an eye once more, spotting the robot lunging at it.

D:!

And the air ripples as it turns into a portal, just as Zwei leaps and his head goes through.

...

Whistling as he enters the bathroom, Shigeru Aoba walks over to the far urinal, working the zipper on his pants as he braces his feet, humming as he relieves himself in the spacious, well kept and high tech NERV lavatory.

Something thumps in the stall behind him. Zipping up, he backs over to the stall, knocking on it. The door silently swings open.

Leaning in, he hears the thump again, leaning in towards the toilet and narrowing his eyes.

And then Zwei's head bursts out of the toilet, snapping its jaws.

"*ANGEL!*"

Aoba lunges back, a high pitched, terrified scream escaping his lips as he scrambles away from the stall, running on hands and knees as he sprints out of the bathroom with a shriek.

...

Part of her wants to ask, very loudly, if the girl with the reddish blonde hair and the maid uniform has had sex with her son, yet. It wasn't five minutes after they actually went into the mansion, which she is still considering burning down if only to strike back at the gold plated whore who ruined her marriage, that Uri introduced her to Annette.

Kyoko is unsure whether or not she likes this girl.

It is a conflict for her. The girl is nice, almost too nice. She smiles and nods and doesn't talk back. It reminds her of her daughter a little too much, and already Kyoko is looking for the psychological cracks, her own crash course telling her that there is no way this is just her job description.

"More tea, Dr. Sohryu?"

She nods, biting her lip. She can't say what is on her mind. She's done that in the past and that's what has given her the reputation she is trying to repair. She's had enough burning bridges to last a lifetime and she's barely forty. No need to add new bodies to the pile.

Sitting in the dining room of the mansion, the three of them at a long table designed to seat twenty, the crystal chandelier reflecting the light, her children are talking about how things have been going in Tokyo-3. Uri is reacting to the news of Shinji and Asuka dating remarkably well. It must be the regular *fella-*

No. She is not going down that path. She is not going to be a *bitch.*

"Annette, you *can* sit down," Uri says. His voice has an edge of weariness to it, sitting just off from the head of the table. Kyoko can tell he's asked her this many times just from how...monotone the request is.

"Excuse me," Annette says, bowing slightly in a sharp imitation of a japanese bow, "I will be right back with lunch."

Annette walks out, back as straight and stiff as a board. She doesn't even wiggle her ass when she walks away. It is very possible, Kyoko realizes, that Annette dresses as a maid for reasons other than indulging a fetish.

"She's a hard worker," Uri says with a sigh, "As far as I know, she's the only staff of the mansion Ms. Makinami did not take with her on her trip, mainly because she was given to someone else."

"Given?" Asuka asks, glancing between her brother and mother, "What do you mean, 'given'?"

Uri taps his fingers together, glancing from side to side.

"It's a...long story," he responds, "You've met the Chairman's ward?"

Kyoko's eyes snap open. That is someone she is quite aware of. That Uri is, also, is something of an issue she was not told about.

"Mother?" Uri asks.

"I think we may need to box the lunch to go," Kyoko says, standing up, "And run down to NERV-Berlin, now."

...

The black sphere hovers, passing through the Geofront. After the lecture from the glasses wearing woman with the brown hair and the net, the Lelielim decided to use stealth instead of speed, phasing through its own puncture in space to leave just enough of an after image to make them think it was being good.

It became curious about the brown haired lady. It wanted to know more. So it determined where the lady came from and went, and decided to go there. Shifting the white over its surface, it comes to a

stop at the small, one floor house on the other side of the Geofront.

:I?

Folding in on itself, the ball chirps as it enters the apartment, slowly rotating as the white light probes the environment, from the sparsely decorated kitchen to the table littered with magazines filled with people too thin to be healthy and relationship advice that borders on insane.

Another trill, and the ball that was a ball floats above the table, observing. Something moves, jumping onto the table. The white, fluffy, overfed persian cat regards the floating billiard ball, tilting his head as the cat makes a similar trilling, low pitched sound.

The ball hovers downward, the lines forming into an unblinking eye. Mr. Fluffles, pet cat of Ritsuko Akagi, rears his back up and hisses, hairs standing up as he shifts into defensive mode. The ball backs away, trilling loudly.

O.o?

The white disappears. Acting reflexively, the ball turns black and expands to the size of a beach ball, consuming the cat and several of the magazines before returning to its original size.

In Cage 3, there is a flickering of light. Several of the technicians look up as the black hole, about three feet wide, appears suddenly over the lake of LCL and bakelite surrounding Unit 01.

Several magazines fall into the yellow and red liquid. And with a surprised yelp and mewl, so does Mr. Fluffles.

...

The limo took the four of them to NERV-Berlin, post haste. She isn't sure why the maid came, only that she insisted she wanted to be there for this. So apparently, the girl knows as well. The only one this will be a nasty surprise for will be Asuka.

NERV-Berlin is built into a dome structure outside of Berlin proper. Several smaller domes surround it, extending into its own air strip and dorm complexes. It is a self-sustained community in and of itself, a

think tank where the brightest minds in the developed world meet to work on the Evangelion Project. It extends two miles beneath the Earth, serving as both the advanced research facility and the home for the other reason she's here.

With Dr. Ikari on suspension, Kyoko is the acting head of Project E. She has levels of authority surpassing world leaders when it comes to the care and maintenance of the Evangelions. Which is why the situation itself is making her practically froth at the mouth but still keep her comments back.

How does Yui *stand* these idiots?

Standing in front of the two guards in front of one of the secondary domes, it takes all of Kyoko's considerable willpower to not kick them in the nuts.

"We're sorry, Dr. Sohryu," they repeat, "But you do not have sufficient clearance to enter this building."

"I am the head of the Evangelion Project," she says, trying to avoid her voice becoming a growl as Asuka idly chats with Annette and Uri watches, "Who does have the proper clearance to enter?"

"That would be me, Dr. Sohryu. Stand down, gentlemen. I will escort them."

The ash haired boy with golden red eyes smiles as he walks up next to them, waving off the two security agents as they holster their guns and back off to the side. The elevator doors open, admitting them, and Kaworu Nagisa inclines his head to them with a greeting.

"Dr. Sohryu. It is good to see you again. Annette, Uri. I presume this is your sister, Uri?"

Uri nods, stepping up next to Asuka as Annette steps back.

"Asuka," he says, "This is Kaworu Nagisa. My brother."

Asuka nods, glancing between the two. The resemblance is unmistakable. Uri is a little better built and his hair and eye color are different, but otherwise the two have more than a passing resemblance.

"Shinji said he met you," Asuka says, turning to Kaworu, "So, you're half brothers?"

Kaworu nods, still smiling. Beaming, even.

"More or less," Uri says, "Everything will be explained when you get there."

He taps the button on the console controls, the doors sealing as the lift descends.

"Where are we going?" Asuka asks.

"My birthplace."

She walks through the corridors of the Berlin base, red eyes narrowed as she searches for him. It has become a ubiquitous sight for the red eyes, blue haired girl to have free access to the base, considering who and *what* she is. In the first days of her freedom, many of the older staffers believed she was her sister. Their reactions were...useful.

"Ayanami."

She stops in mid step. The voice is recognized. The voice is obeyed. Folding her hands behind her, in her ubiquitous beige NERV uniform, Kei Ayanami turns as the whirring of the gears indicates the man who has approached her.

"Mr. Chairman."

The whirring stops as Lorenz Kihl, Chairman of the Committee for Human Instrumentality, comes to a half. Adjusting his visor, the ancient man regards Kei with a cool, neutral gaze, resting one hand on the decorative titanium cane, the red gem set in the hilt glowing faintly.

"Come with me."

The doors open. Clicking a remote in his hand, Kaworu enters the darkened room as the first florescent lights come to life.

"Uri is partially correct," Kaworu says, "If he wanted to be exact, this is not the place he was made. He was actually 'conceived' in Antarctica. This is just where he was made who he is."

The lights flicker on. Annette does not react. She has seen this before. In fact, this is one of the first things Nagisa showed her when she entered his employ. He does not suffer secrets, after all. Asuka's jaw

drops open, looking around, turning in a full circle as the truth of the matter hits home. Kyoko remains expressionless.

Lining the room, going as far as the eye can see, are tubes. Cylinders filled with LCL, diagnostic equipment lining the walls, and in each container there is, in varied states of development, things resembling human. Some deformed, some not yet developed, but each with pale hair and red eyes. Dormant, not sleeping.

"NERV-1 is not the only Nephilem project," Kaworu says, "As you are aware, Dr. Sohryu, I am myself a Nephilem. This is where I was born."

Uri walks over to the sole empty tube, wiping away the condensation on the display panel. Each tube has a name, each one obscured by condensation. On the one before him, the name is now visible.

Uriel.

"And this is where I was born," Uri says, "I am a Nephilem, half angel and half human. Just like Nagisa."

His fists clench, turning to them, his eyes seeming redder than normal.

"Well?" he asks, "Anything to say, Asuka?"

Asuka glances from side to side, tapping her fingers together.

"So...you're like Rei?"

Uri pauses. His rant dies on his lips as Asuka reacts in the exact opposite fashion from what he expected. No condemnations, no screaming, no accusing him of being an abomination.

"He has been like this," Annette says, patting Asuka on the shoulder, "Mr. Nagisa showed him this room two weeks ago. He is honestly expecting people to yell at him."

Uri begins to sputter.

"Well, I guess the eyes were the clue," Asuka says with a shrug, "It isn't l-like he behaves like Rei. Well, then it's nature versus nurture, right?"

"Social version of Natural Selection?"

"Oh? You studied biology, to?"

"In my spare time, Ms. Sohryu."

Uri scratches his head, glancing between Annette and Asuka, clenching his eyes shut as he leans against the tube.

"You're not...terrified? Horrified?"

"Why would I be?" Asuka asks, shrugging, "This...doesn't change who you are. You're still my brother."

"I'm *not!* I was created in a test tube! I have the First Angel's genes in me! I'm a *Gott-damned Angel*-"

He recoils, stumbling back from the slap. Kyoko massages her hand, sighing as Annette and Asuka stare at her in shock.

"Get a hold of yourself," Kyoko says, her voice level, "At very least, don't act like this shocks *me.* I've known this for years."

She sighs, helping Uri stand, placing her hands on his shoulder as he averts her gaze, switching between the floors and Kaworu as the pale boy chuckles and shakes his head.

"You never told me," Uri growls, albeit weakly.

"Of course not. If I told you when you were a child, you would have lost it."

She sighs.

"I've had a...life changing experience," Kyoko continues, "I've come to the realization of how badly I've wronged you and Asuka. I'm trying to make amends, and it has been hard. I am sorry I was not there for you when you needed me, Uri."

Narrowing her eyes, she turns to Nagisa. Finding himself targeted by her, his jovial expression fades and he backs away.

"What have you *not* told him?" she asks, "Because he seems to be under the distinctive impression he is *not* my son."

"I was under the impression that I wasn't."

Kyoko sighs, turning back to Uri and gripping him by the chin, staring at him.

"Your hair color isn't a dye job, Uri," she says, "You're specially made. You're one of a kind. When I had the Committee create you, I had them combine your base with my genetic material. You *are* my son.

You *are* Asuka's brother. You're also his,"

She inclines her head towards Kaworu.

"So make of that what you will. I only hope you make better choices in the romantic arena than he does, because I do not believe you can regenerate."

The doors open once more. There is a whirring of gears and heavy footsteps, the five of them turning as two new occupants enter.

"Kaworu, I believe we have talked before about guests in the off-limits parts of the NERV facilities."

Kyoko straightens up.

"Chairman Kihl," she says.

"Doctor Sohryu," Lorenze Kihl says, almost off handedly, as his visor scans over the people before him and he smile, "Ah. Ms. Sohryu, the Second Child. I have been wanting to meet you for some time. I have heard a good deal about your exploits with the Evangelion despite minimal training. Kaworu, please escort them to the hangar."

"If I may ask, Chairman," Kyoko says, "Is there an emergency?"

"Rei?" Asuka asks, staring at the girl with Kihl.

"The familiarity is forgivable," Kihl says, "My assistant, Ms. Kei Ayanami. Dr. Sohryu, remain here. The three of us must discuss matters."

"Yes," Kei says, "And please. Hurry. There has been an accident in NERV-1 involving Pilot Ikari."

Asuka's eyes snap wide. Sighing, Kaworu begins walking to the hangar doors, Annette pushing Asuka along as Uri follows. The doors close, the lift speeding up, as Kihl sighs and begins pacing around Kyoko.

"You have made inquiries into inspecting the Mark 06," he says, "Indeed. The Mark 06 will be at NERV-1 for the emergency, as another Angel will be arriving, soon. Take care to not damage it, but examine the S2 engine for what data you can. We are planning to refit the other Evangelions as time and resources allow."

"I see. And the Unit 03 test?"

"The information you forwarded was considered and approved," Kihl responds, "The Unit 03 activation test will be held at NERV-America. The Marduk Report is finalizing candidates for the Fourth Child. Ayanami."

Kei nods.

"Chairman," she says.

"You have made many attempts to escape confinement at NERV-Berlin. I am forced to take matters into my own hands. I take no pleasure from doing this, but we must set precedents."

From within his robe, he withdraws a gun, a simple military pistol. Kei's eyes snap open, and the air in front of her shimmers, Kyoko stepping back and shielding her face with her hands for the inevitable ricochet.

Instead, the bullet passes effortlessly through the field, through Kei's shoulder and out the back. She stumbles back, staring at the wound, wincing.

"You...you *shot* me?"

"Indeed," Kihl says, and clicks the safety back on, "The bullet was made with the same material that the replica Lances are being fashioned with. Thank you for determining that they can pass through AT Fields without incident. Dr. Sohryu, you will be taking Ms. Ayanami with you back to Tokyo-3. Mr. Sohryu will be remaining here."

"Why is Uri remaining in Berlin?" Kyoko asks, eyes fixed on the girl.

"Because he is needed here," Kihl responds, "Come. We do not have much time."

Leaning on the cane, the red gem glowing in tune with Kei's eyes, he walks towards the lift.

"After all," he says, "I have given Ms. Ayanami a home and guidance. But the girl still needs her *Mother*."

...

And off the coast of Tokyo-3, something stirs. It is time, it thinks. It is

time to reveal itself. And the three hole mask rotates and the twin cores shine, as it unveils the Light of its Soul and begins its ascent.

WARNING!

AT FIELD DETECTED!

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED

16TH ANGEL: CONFIRMED!

...

WE ARE.

THROUGH LICENSE OF HE WHO WAS CALLED "I AM" WE HAVE COME.

And though the feet shall stomp upon the Base Earth on this most blessed mission, we have come.

WE are the symmetry.

WE are the dancers upon the edge of forever.

Alone, we are many. An army unto ourselves.

We are the Angels of Dance. Angels of Music. Angels of Poetry.

We are the Resurrection of God

We are the Trumpeters of God.

We are Israfel.

We are here.

Chapter 48: Adventures in ShinjiSitting

In addition to getting hit by a billiard ball traveling at several feet per second, which in and of itself left a bruise, the impact made him land on his foot wrong, twisting his ankle. His scream of surprise and quite frankly pain caused Lilly, as they were now calling the Angel Spawn, to in shock open a portal to NERV's biological research department, spraying him in the face with a rather nasty case of Mono.

So, in summation, Shinji Ikari is not happy.

Foot in a cast, eyes delirious, and lying in the bed, he had the hopeful fortune of getting mothered by his mother for the duration of his traction.

Then the Angel appeared and she was recalled to NERV.

Of course, this leads him bedridden, in his parents' apartment, in a particular bed which is normally covered in stuffed animals. This itself wouldn't be a problem, as he has no curiosity of what is in the closet, nor the means to get to it.

"Sooooo~ooooo I had an idea."

No, the problem is actually a much deeper one.

"What if they let *me* raise Lilly? I mean, then I wouldn't even need air vents! But that would be cheating, and I like challenges, and if you take the challenge out of it it's going to not be fun anymore and just boooooooooooooooooooooooring and stupid and stuff and junk. And junk."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Rei sits cross legged, facing Shinji. Staring at him. She tilts her head slightly, the ever present smile on her face, hands on her knees as she simply, silently, stares at him.

"Rei," he asks, his voice hoarse, tired, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

Her eyes dart around the room. Bouncing on the bed, she stands up, walking across him and hopping off to the floor, humming to herself as she skips across the room, exiting the bedroom and entering the living room of their parents' apartment. Sighing, he leans back on the bed, eyelids heavy and body sore and sick.

So he does not hear it as Rei hops onto the living room table, producing a screw driver and undoing one of the locks on the ceiling vent. Where normally cool are cycles through the apartment during summer time, now something else comes through.

"So," Rei says, "Who wants the first turn?"

Hanging upside down, clad in a pink and green plugsuit and with a black bandana around her head, Hatchi Ayanami grins.

"Me!"

0

0

Chapter 48: Adventures in Shinji-sitting

0

0

Kei was hurt. He could tell that much. She was hurt for a reason, though, which is what he tells himself to bite back the bile that he feels in his mouth. It sends a message and it is a warning, but in all honesty he does not care about that, only noticing the bandage over her shoulder from the external cockpit.

Still, he will not strike back.

Not yet. Kihl will wait for now. There are more important matters than him to deal with.

"My apologies," Kaworu says, "Allow me to refocus my concentration."

Closing his eyes, clad in his navy and gray plug suit, the red gem set in its chest glows as the A-10 connectors on his head begin a steady hum.

"Stage 1," he says, "Release muscular clamps. Set language to Latin."

Classical speak in his ears, the walls of the entry plug glowing and lining with archaic text and code.

"Stage 2. Set plug depth at 57, ionize LCL."

His hair stands up at the back of his neck. The plug lurches, deep into the Evangelion's spine, deeper than normally recommended...but this is no ordinary Evangelion. He rolls the thought on his tongue. Ordinary Evangelion. What is normal about any of them?

"Stage 3," he says, gripping the butterfly controls, "Synchro start."

The red gems at the back of each glove glow. The plug lurches, the walls of the Entry Plug glowing white, like a room of glowing marble surrounding him. His mind makes contact, the dormant sentience of the Moon Giant welcoming him.

"**Fifth Child recognized. Synchronization at 300%.**"

The Eva stands up a little straighter.

"**Evangelion Mark 06:**"

The visor glows, flashing white.

"**Rise.**"

A rush of air, and the AT Field presses downward. By its own power, the black Evangelion rises into the air, the faintest outline of seven wings of orange light surrounding it as it rises through the entry shaft and to the surface, hovering over NERV-Berlin as the last passengers board the plane. It was decided that a more...express...route would be taken back to Tokyo-3.

"Dr. Sohryu," he says, willing the Evangelion forward, "I will now surround your craft with an AT Field."

Extending a hand to either side of the craft, a visible orange field surrounds the VTOL, the bottom of the craft resting against it as the Eva lifts it up.

"And now we're off," he says, "Please keep your seats in upright, locked positions. Our transit time will be fifteen minutes. Oh, and, I believe the term is 'think of Christmas.'"

The jets on the back of the Eva fire, launching it into the air as the AT Field around the Mark 06 warps and folds in on itself...

And with a burst of air and sound, it is gone.

...

The digital landscape fades. Consciousness feels odd, limited, as vision returns.

"*Body temperature approaching normal levels. EKG readings nominal. Core activity at levels similar to Rei's. No reading from the S2 organ."*

A click and whir. She feels heavy, for the first time. Her fingers twitch, joints popping as they move, like they've been stiff and still for so long. The memories click, but they must not have told her. She was getting comfortable, maybe too comfortable, letting things run on automatic while...oh. *Oh.*

"*Yeah, just like we thought. Too many things were running on automatic, Dr. Akagi. Some things could, but she doesn't know how to direct construction equipment or utilities. The strain was starting to show, and Dr. Sohryu did conclude her mind would have just broken down in the next month."*

"Dr. Sohryu?"

"Trying to remain professional here, Dr. Akagi. That is my daughter you're defrosting."

A knock on the glass, and her eyes open. Without the glasses, it seems fuzzy, weird. But that could also be the LCL she's peering through, seeing the smiling, tired face on the other side of the reinforced cylinder, in the outside wall.

"*Hey, kid,"* Pieter Sohryu says, "*Welcome back to the real world."*

The main lab has been put aside to the defrosting experiment, the cylinder still connected to the MAGI remote server, the massive red sphere built into the ceiling, by a series of thick wires. A full team of six, including both Akagi and Ibuki work on the connection interface, slowly bringing up Mari's core temperature as the teams prep for surgery.

The doors slide open. Already in surgical greens, Yui Ikari adjusts her glasses as she walks in, nodding to Pieter.

"I expected you to be ecstatic," she says.

"Nervous. Is she going to be okay?"

"This isn't the same sort of procedure that they used to stabilize Kei,"

Yui explains, "We're just making sure everything is connected properly. If an Angel is on the way, we want to make sure she doesn't have some sort of attack."

He nods, pacing, as holographic displays give them a full three dimensional image of Mari's internals, the girl silently floating in the LCL, humming to herself.

"Thanks for coming back on short notice," Pieter says, "I didn't want to end your vacation, but you are the foremost expert on this."

She nods with a smirk, folding her arms as she stares at the tube.

"Ritsuko, I presume the MAGI is running a full auto program?" she asks.

Ritsuko looks up from the console. She glances at Maya, who glances back and shakes her head.

"Oh, dear," Maya says.

The lights flicker, turning back on. Several cameras turn towards Yui.

"Ritsuko," Yui says, "Who is in charge of the MAGI, right now?"

A holographic screen folds down from the high ceiling, a single cursor flashing on and off at the left side of it.

HOW ARE YOU GENTLEMEN.

Pieter palms his face. Mari emits a small stream of bubbles from her mouth as Yui's smile disappears and she glares at the screen.

ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US. YOU HAVE NO CHANCE MAKE YOUR TIME. HA HA HA HA HA.

"Oh, Christ," Yui groans, rubbing her temples, "Girls?"

SORRY, MOM.

"You...just handed Tokyo-3 to them," Yui sighs, pinching her nose, "*Grufen.* Right. Okay. Girls, remember that you're now in charge of all of Tokyo-3's automated services. That means the trains, the Eva launch chutes, and-"

AND THE ANTI-ANGEL DEFENSIVE BATTERIES! N2 MINES AWAY!

The screens flicker, showing one of the launch catapults, in which rests a perfectly normal looking barrel.

"That's not an N2 mine," Pieter says.

"No," Yui sighs, "Nana?"

YEP! THE SUPERCOLLIDER WAS REALLY COOL!

The locks release, the cage rocketing up the railings towards the surface. Yui watches with a completely blank expression as the catapult breaks the sound barrier in the launch tube, leaving the rails completely as it his the surface and continues on towards the coast.

"What is in the barrel?" Pieter asks.

"Judging from Nana hijacking the supercollider used in the Project E weapons labs and the time she could have been doing so without us knowing...I'd say about three grams of Antimatter."

...

Three toed feet pound down on the surface, the massive silver and black form of the Angel making landfall just as its three hole bearing face rotates, looking skyward as something whistles through the air.

It looks up, just as the improvised explosive of the barrel ignites, sheering the barrel and revealing the magnetic bottle.

The head rotates. The eyes stare at it. And inwardly, in a chorus of voices, Israfel curses its luck. And then comes the explosion, like a second sun in the sky.

...

Yui stares at the screen, blinking and staring at it as the view clears and she gets a good look at the Angel. Or, at least, the bottom half of the Angel.

"That's talent," Pieter says.

The black ball floating next to Pieter stares at the screen.

:D!

BOOM FOR THE BOOM GOD!

"Thank you, Nana," Yui sighs, "Well, we do have reliable intel on this Angel thanks to the other Shinji. And we have time while it regenerates. Brief Katsuragi and Agent Kaji. They have the plan. I'm giving Mari the checkup."

Pieter nods, one last glance at his daughter, and walks out.

...

Rei has found an Xbox, hooked it up to the television in her room, which is the room he is using, and loaded up a game from this series called 'Touhou.' Midway through the first level, he had a mild epileptic seizure and passed out. She didn't really notice. Of course, that may have been the mono as well, but he isn't really sure. He can't be sure where Rei is involved.

When he comes to, Rei isn't in the room, and well, he has to take a leak.

Hopping on one foot out of the bedroom, still delirious and dizzy, he exits and makes his way into the living room, down the hallway, and into the bathroom. In some ways, he is thankful that his parents are at NERV. Mother and Smother rhymes for a reason, after all.

Entering the pink tiled bathroom, he braces himself against the wall, closing his eyes as he undoes the tie on his sweatpants. Or at least, tries to.

This is when the noose he has stepped into tightens around his ankle and pulls him up, Shinji screaming as the quick jerk suspends him upside down from the ceiling.

"That was *awesome!"* Rei yells, jumping out from behind the shower curtains, "The trap worked! It worked it worked it worked! Now you're completely at my mercy for me to beat you like a pinata until candy comes out!"

Shinji stares at her, swinging back and forth from the ceiling.

"Rei. Please cut me down."

Rei stares at him.

"Do you like shooting games?" she asks.

He stares back, sighing.

"Oh...you needed to go to the bathroom?" Rei asks.

Shinji sighs, looking 'down.'

"Not anymore."

Rei pauses. She stares at him, glancing from side to side, and smiles.

"Okay! Lemme get you some new pants! And then I'll set up the console. And stuff. And then we can shoot things! That sounds *great!*"

She skips out, leaving Shinji hanging from the ceiling. He sighs, thinking he should be outraged, but should have expected something like this when he realized he was going to have Rei as his nursemaid. He does barely hear the ventilation grate in the living room swing open, and Rei peaks her head in.

"Change of plans!" she sing songs, "Lunch time! I'm making *SALAD!"*

...

The Mark 06 descends into the hangar leading to the Cages as the VTOL's doors open, the open air hitting the occupants as they walk out of the V-22. Already, the full retinue is there to meet them. Dr. Ikari runs up the stairs to the raised VTOL pad as Pieter discusses the situation with Kyoko.

"Well, that's the problem," Pieter says, "05's N2 reactor conked out and we need a new one. We've tried hooking him up to power feeds, but that just provides enough juice to keep his AI core online. There's no way to just transmit enough power for him to move."

"And Ikari?"

"Shinji's delirious and injured. We can't put him in 01. Meaning our two pilots are Asuka and Mana."

Asuka's knuckles turn white, wringing her fingers as her gaze darts

around the platform. Yui squeezes her shoulder, smiling with a nod.

"He's fine," she says, "He just twisted his ankle and got a spray of a nasty virus. He'll be fine in a few days."

Asuka nods, the smile faint, and shaky. Which is when the last passenger of the VTOL steps out onto the platform, her arm in a sling and staring at Asuka. The platform goes silent. Everyone knows the girl is a dead ringer for Ayanami, if maybe a bit paler, hair a bit lighter, and eyes sharper.

"Oh my God," Yui whispers, "*Kei?"*

"Mother," Kei Ayanami responds, narrowing her eyes slightly, "It has been a while. The Chairman sent me-"

No other words make it out before Yui runs over and pulls Kei into a hug, kissing her on the forehead and muffling Kei's words as her face buries itself in her shoulder.

"Oh, thank *God,*" Yui whispers, "I thought you were *dead,* or worse."

Kei finds her ability to make a biting observation of how she wasn't missed dying on her lips. She had the entire thing planned out, after all. Careful observations, biting comments, maybe make someone cry before proving that she was the most capable person in the room and solving the Eva problem.

Then this happened. She thinks she might not be as bitter towards Little Mommy as she thought.

"Kei," Yui says, holding her at arms length, "What happened to you? How did you get injured?"

"Chairman Kihl shot her," Kyoko says, "She was trying to escape. We brought her back. Ikari, we'll need to speak about-"

"That *son of a bitch,*" Yui growls, "Wait...how?"

"That can wait," Kyoko says, hand squeezing Yui's shoulder, "We have bigger things to worry about. I'll have Section 2 escort Kei to somewhere safe. Asuka, report to Agent Kaji and Katsuragi. There's a plan to take care of the Angel, and you're part of it."

Asuka nods, albeit shakily. Nodding to Pieter, Kyoko only watches as her ex-husband escorts their daughter back into the base. Yes, it is

cruel to force her to do this, especially when she has matters of other import on her mind. But this is not a time for gentleness or subtlety. She is sure she'll get an earful from Katsuragi about it, later.

"Right," Kyoko sighs, "Well, first thing's first. We need to get Prime up and running. Think we should talk with our new specialist?"

Yui nods, still holding onto Kei.

"Specialist?" Kei asks.

"Rei didn't come back alone," Yui responds, as she walks her into the NERV main facility, "She...brought a guest."

...

"Whelp. We're lost."

Pieter sighs, clicking on his PDA and staring at the map. It has been fifteen minutes since they re-entered NERV-1 with the basis of finding Katsuragi to find out about the plan for dealing with the Angel, since they had about a week before it regenerated fully. Unfortunately, the original plan involving synchronization between her and Shinji was scrapped due to his accident.

Something Asuka has not stopped thinking about, pacing next to her father as they stand at one of the crossroad hallways that dot the NERV-1 superstructure.

"Asuka," Pieter says, "Shinji'll be fine."

"Y-you know I was worried?"

"I did the same thing when you and your mother were lost in the Dirac," he responds, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder, "I can tell. Let's see..."

He begins walking, Asuka following him, entering through one set of double doors and stopping.

"*Yes?"*

"Sorry," Pieter groans, "Thought this was one of the MAGI terminal rooms."

The woman...woman?...sitting on the bench in the relatively spartan room sighs, walking over to the screen installed on the side and tapping it.

"*It was,"* she says, her voice carrying an accent that resembles eastern european, "*They haven't updated the map since I got here, I guess."*

Asuka's head tilts, staring at the person. The legs seem wrong, bent like a horse's or birds past the knee, ending in two toes. The fingers, to. She has two fingers and a thumb, each digit much larger than it should be. Then there's the suit. It is a body hugging set of armor, no seams visible, colored purple and gray with a hood over the opaque glass helm where she can see eyes that seem to glow in whatever gas is inside the helmet.

"Um..."

"Right," Pieter says, "I'm gonna get ripped a new one for this. Asuka, remember how Rei came back with a bag of...well...stuff?"

Asuka nods.

The woman in the suit sighs, folding her arms, the light at the mouth piece flashing with the click of her tongue.

"Well, we found someone in it," he says, "This is Tali."

"*Tali'Zorah nar Rayya vas Normandy,"* the woman says, "*And from the way the girl is looking at me, I am presuming you haven't told anyone outside of the high level command staff. Your daughter?"*

"Get that from the MAGI?"

"*Sub Director, I have not hacked the MAGI for several reasons. First, I am not exactly sure I want Rei's sisters to know where I am as my encounter suit does not respond well to 'rough play,' and second, I figure if I am on my best behavior I will stand less of a chance of being dissected."*

Pieter turns to Asuka, leaning in close.

"She's a bit sarcastic," he whispers.

"*I'm right here, you know."*

"That and she doesn't like that we keep asking her about faster than light travel," Pieter shrugs, "We're trying to find out how to send her back home, and her home universe has regular space travel. Rei met

her on a spaceship."

"*Oh, here we go,"* Tali says with a sigh, palming her helmet, "*For the seventh time so far, the problem is that you don't have any Element Zero. The schematics for a FTL drive a childs play, but if you don't have the actual element needed for it, it's like trying to run a combustion engine off of rocks. It won't work and you may get something jammed into your eye."*

Pieter nods with a chuckle.

"Actually, we're lost," he says, "We're trying to figure out where Katsuragi is. You happen to know?"

Which is when Asuka notices the almost transparent field between them and Tali, stepping back from it as the woman holds up her right hand. A semi transparent orange device glows, a round ball over the hand and an outline of a shape over the rest of the forearm and the field vanishes.

"*Better yet, I'll show you,"* she says, "*I've finished the diagnostics. Nothing in the base is fatal to me and I sterilized my suit. Besides which, I've gotten stir crazy."*

"Sounds good to me. We could use an extra set of eyes on this," he says, and gestures to the door, "Lead the way."

...

Opening his eyes and realizing it is morning of the next day, Shinji sits up and wavers slightly between his choices of going back to sleep, going to the bathroom, or just laying back and soiling himself. Of course, this isn't *his* bed, it's *Rei's* bed, and it's considered rude to do this sort of thing to someone's sheets.

Climbing to his feet, he begins stumbling for the door, successfully navigating the room and entering the hallway. He no longer smells cucumbers. He never knew cucumbers had a smell, either. Now he does. They smell like fear.

Walking along the hallway, braced on the wall, he avoids sending a family photo crashing to the ground before ducking into the bathroom. He sees no sign of Rei. This is good. Bracing on the toilet, he attempts to stand up straight, pulling at the strap of his sweat pants as he realizes he has no hand eye coordination whatsoever.

"Vous m'aiment le tirer pour vous?"

The first question going through Shinji's mind is asking why Rei is dressed in a french maid outfit. The second thing he is curious about is why she is wearing a *french maid outfit.*

"Rei?" he asks.

"*Oui?"*

"Why are you in the bathroom?"

"Tout le plus facile de vous acculer, mon trépied fidèle."

He blinks. He never knew Rei knew french, much less had a french maid outfit. Still, this doesn't seem...right. Outside of her dressing like this, her attitude seems...off.

Well, that doesn't matter. What matters right now is that everything he's eaten for the past two days is coming up for a rematch, prompting Shinji to brace against the toilet and begin what would be twenty minutes of barfing.

"Uh oh."

Well, at least Rei isn't speaking French anymore.

The room keeps spinning. His vision starts to go dark as Rei begins panicking, looking around and fingers fidgeting, yelling out something. And then the ventilation grate opens in the bathroom and another Rei hops out, just as Shinji conks out.

...

"*So, let me get this straight. There is a homicidal 300 foot tall alien creature that is slowly regenerating outside the city limits, and the big plan to deal with it is a dance battle?"*

"You know, when she says it, it does sound stupid," Kaji responds.

Standing in the dimly lit briefing room, the sole source of light the holographic map table, Misato glares at their guest and snorts.

"We're operating from intel," she says, "That's how they dealt with the Angel on their world, so it does mean it should work. However, it's

changed because Unit 01's out of action, and so's 05 due to it's N2 generator burning out."

"*So, we're assuming the Angel has the same capabilities of the one you were told about,"* Tali says, folding her arms as she stares at the holographic outline of the half of the Angel still standing, "*What are the back up plans?"*

"More explosives," Pieter responds, Asuka standing next to him, "As it is, though, we do have heavy weapons we can bring to bear, but those have a large collateral damage."

The door opens, Kyoko walking in and standing next to Asuka.

"Katsuragi," she says, "Everything set up?"

"Asuka and Mana will be undergoing synch training," Misato explains, "We have six days until the Angel regenerates. If we're lucky, Shinji will be back on his feet by then and he can join the party."

"And the Mark 06?" Pieter asks.

"On loan from NERV-Germany," Kaji responds, "In case everything goes to Hell. The Commander's briefing Pilot Nagisa in his office, then he's leaving the base."

The room goes silent, Katsuragi flicking the table and turning it into a hologram of Jet Alone Prime.

"Right," Pieter says with a grimace, "Alright. Dr. and Commander Ikari are still suspended. Remember that, but we will be able to deal with this Angel ourselves. Katsuragi. Assignments."

"Tali, you're the engineering expert. You're working with the team outfitting Jet Alone with the Type F armor. Akagi is still trying to induce a faster regeneration with 00, but we may not have it in time. Rei is backup for all pilots. Let's get to work."

...

The Mausoleum, the office of the Supreme Commander of NERV. LCL still crusted on his plugsuit, Kaworu Nagisa stands in front of Commander Ikari, the as always beaming smile on his face as the Commander assesses him. Hands folded behind him, standing in front

of the desk, Kaworu waits as the Commander clears his throat.

"In addition to piloting the Mark 06, you stated that you had a request for your time in Tokyo-3, Pilot Nagisa."

"Yes, Commander," Kaworu responds.

"And that is?"

"I wish to ask for your permission," Kaworu says, "To court your daughter, Rei."

A moment of silence passes, as the Commander folds his hands into a bridge over his mouth, staring across at the Nephilem.

"And what is your intention towards Rei, Pilot Nagisa."

"Only one thing, Commander."

"And that is?"

Kaworu smiles.

"***Babies."***

...

The first infiltrated Tokyo-3 shortly after the first of the impacts, when it realized that the Lilim had far more boom at their disposal than expected. The more it divided itself, the more of it there were, and it found it did not need the Core. Not as much, at least.

After all, the Lilim had to die. But there was no reason all their stuff had to go. They wanted to see, after all, what he fire making primates managed to do.

The first thing to spot one of them was a small creature with fur and a bushy tail. Coming out of its hidey hole in a tree on the outskirts of Tokyo-3, the squirrel stares at the one foot tall, round shouldered creature with the three hole face.

The squirrel tilts its head, retreating into the tree, and the new creature ignores it, continuing its walk towards the Fortress City. More join it, multiple angles and attack vectors, sneaking into the

ventilation system built on the outside. Which was, of course, designed to keep large creatures out. Not them.

They climb in, dozens of them at first, then hundreds. The fragments of Israfel, the Angel of Dance and Poetry and Song, infiltrating the stronghold of the Lilim. So small they avert detection, minor in stature but not in numbers. They converge at one of the downtown areas, empty currently due to the Angel alert.

One building seems...promising. They sneak in, through windows and vents, finding it abandoned in the mad rush to get to the shelters. Stools still overturned, power still on the varied flashing screens and tall boxes with the knobs set for Lilim hands.

One hops onto one stool, staring at the screen, a three fingered hand gripping the knob, manipulating it and tapping buttons with its other hand. Others find other machines, the Lilim technology calling to them with bright colors and synthetic sounds. *This* is their power? Israfel asks its many selves.

Then there is the centerpiece of the room. It is large, and loud, and colorful. Like a great idol that they would worship as a living God. Drawn to it, they are. Fascinated, their faces spinning, tilting as they stare and the great wonder of Lilim technology.

Two are chosen, standing upon the altar. One extends its AT Field into the coin slot, fooling it with its power. The screen flashes, the floor beneath them humming to life.

"*ARE YOU READY TO DANCE?*"

The two Israfels raise their hands up, the music beginning. As the other Israfels watch, curious and fascinated, they begin to wonder. Maybe the Lilim are onto something after all...

...

Shinji wakes up. Opening his eyes, he stares at Rei.

And Rei.

And Rei.

"Okay," he croaks, "I think I'm starting to understand."

Chapter 49: Kaworu's Magic Date Night

So, it was a rather simple explanation. Since they never got the chance to really spend time with their big brother, especially because of how they were made and because they couldn't leave the MAGI under normal circumstances, they made a deal with Rei. Rei takes one of their places, and they get to come out for a couple of hours before switching with another.

"Wait," Shinji says, "The MAGI is in control of Tokyo-3, right?"

Kiko nods.

"And Rei is inside the MAGI."

Nana nods.

"So...Rei is in control of Tokyo-3?"

Zyuu nods.

Sitting around the kitchen table with three of his sisters, with the meal he made for all of them now that he's feeling more...well...human...Shinji blinks and rubs the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, Mom is gonna be *pissed*..."

...

You have come expecting a pilot, but instead you find a GOD!

The digital landscape unfolds, forming into a population of millions. Many have the same faces. In fact, there are only six different faces in the crowd, all on their knees and chanting their names.

They rule by fear.

Rule by love.

Rule by fear of their harsh, rough, uncomfortable love, which in the case of punishment can involve a large pumpkin used in a-

"Oooo, check this out!" Hatchi calls out, "I found the MAGI codes for the portable fuel tanks and the building roof ventilators, and I can

make building flamethrowers!"

Iti, Siyon, and Rei clap their hands together and squeal.

"Awesome!"

Chapter 49: Kaworu's Magic Date Night

She opens her eyes for the first time in a very, very long time, feeling the air, the real air on her face. Not some digital world or the warm thickness of the LCL, but the true, real world. Mari Makinami softly flexes her fingers, wincing as the knuckles crack from going so long without use.

"Ah, there we go. She's coming around."

New voice. She wants to look into the MAGI to find out who it is, but can't. She can't feel the MAGI anymore.

"I can see that."

Ah, there we go. Edgy, impatient, german accent. Dr. Sohryu.

"Ms. Zorah, could you leave a few minutes?"

A pause, a click of something. A light?

"*Of course, Dr. Sohryu. I'll monitor things remotely."*

The door slides shut, and Mari's vision begins to clear. Her throat feels weird, but that's because of the Core lodged where her tonsils would be.

The bed shakes, the frame rising as Mari finds herself sitting up. The glasses slide over her nose and she smirks, watching as Kyoko Sohryu sits down in the chair next to the bed.

"You're conscious," Kyoko explains, "For the next week, you will be disconnected from the MAGI while we run tests and determine if we can find a suitable substitute for you as the MAGI core consciousness. How do you feel?"

"Alive," Mari says with a shrug, "Honestly didn't expect to find you here, Dr. Sohryu."

"Your father's helping plan the attack on the Angel," she says, "He asked me to be here when you woke."

"What about Asuka?" Mari asks.

"Part of the plan to deal with the Angel."

Mari nods, pursing her lips.

"I've come to the conclusion," Kyoko says, "That I've misused my talent for being...well..."

"A bitch?"

"More or less."

Kyoko pauses, tapping her fingers on the armrests.

"I believe I've spent my time hating the wrong people," Kyoko continues, "You, for example. I've concluded you're more or less blameless. If I should direct my justified anger towards anyone, well..."

"You hate my Mom?"

Kyoko nods.

"Great. Join the club," Mari responds.

Kyoko pauses, staring at the girl. A small smile crosses her face and she sits back.

"Really?" she says, "Well...you're very attached to your father. I figured you would be to your mother, to."

"No offense, Dr. Sohryu, but my Mom could out-bitch you."

"Is that a challenge?"

Mari snorts. A small chuckle and she stares at Kyoko, who sees her, *sees* her for the first time. The two relax, the tension leaving their shoulders as Kyoko crosses her legs and Mari sits back.

"What about Dad?" Mari finally asks, "He's not exactly blameless."

"Neither am I," Kyoko responds, "I did help to drive him away."

Mari nods, folding her hands on her lap as she smirks.

"A question," Kyoko says, pursing her lips, "The maid, Annette. Did you know her?"

"Annette? Not really. She didn't really work for my Mom," Mari responds, "As far as I know, she always worked for Mr. Nagisa."

Scratching her head, Mari nods.

"Long story short, she is owned by my Mom's family," Mari explains, "She was sold to them to cover her family's debts. I honestly don't know Annette's last name. I'm not even sure she does. But, she was given to Mr. Nagisa and she works for the Chairman."

Kyoko stares at her for a long moment, silent.

"You...know the Chairman?"

"Not related," Mari says, "But Mom's worked for him in the past. And when he would come visit, Mr. Nagisa would be with him."

...

The ventilation grate closes once again as Shinji watches the last of them disappear. Counting from ten, he sits on the couch and watches as the grate opens once more and Rei drops down, walking over and patting him on the head before skipping into the kitchen.

"You cooked, I'll clean," Rei says.

"How did you get here so fast?" he asks.

"My secret."

The door opens, Shinji turning on the couch.

"We're home!" Yui announces, "Shinji, Rei?"

"Right here," Shinji groans, standing up with some effort, as he watches his mother enter with Rei at her side. Then he notices Rei is in a NERV uniform, with a cast on her arm.

And then Rei walks out from the kitchen.

Rei freezes, staring at her mirror as the other girl stares at Rei with the distinct lack of Rei's tell-tale smile. The air hangs silent and still as Yui wisely steps back and out of Rei's line of approach.

"*KEI!*"

And Kei's eyes go wide as Rei leaps across the living room and tackle hugs her.

Stepping over them, Yui walks over to the couch, placing her hand on Shinji's forehead before leaning over and kissing him on the top of the head.

"Your fever's going down," she says, "How are you feeling?"

"Vaguely human," he says, "Should I ask?"

"Kei's come back from Germany," Yui explains, "Her core's been stabilized, so she's not in any of the danger her sisters are in. She'll be staying with me and your father."

"Right."

"We're not going to send you back to Katsuragi until after the crisis is done," Yui says, "Besides which, if we had you move here permanently, we'd also have to have Katsuragi and Asuka live here, to. Not enough room."

Shinji smirks, nodding. His mother does have a sort of logic to her...well, logic.

"Rei. Let go of your sister."

Stumbling, Kei rises, bracing on the couch as Rei skips off into the kitchen. Taking a moment to compose herself, Kei stares at Shinji, narrowing her eyes as Shinji leans back against the couch.

"Besides which," Yui explains, "Kei will be looking after you, tonight. Kaworu asked your father if he can take Rei out on a date."

"And he's still alive?"

Neither notices the slight flaring of Kei's nostils or the twitch of her fingers.

"He was very polite about it," Yui explains, shrugging, "And didn't even cry. Much."

Rei walks out. Somehow in a bright pink apron and with bright pink latex gloves on, she carefully closes the door to the kitchen behind her, at which point Yui notices the kitchen now has a doorway. Blinking and pinking the bridge of her nose, she sighs.

"Rei, we'll discuss things about tonight," she says, "Also, you'll check up on Asuka and Mana. Tell Asuka how Shinji's doing."

"Right-o," she says, and runs out, still in the apron and gloves.

"I'll be back soon," Yui says, "Your father and I are going out to dinner tonight. I think he's just nervous about Rei going on a date. You two will be okay for a bit?"

"Yeah," Shinji says.

"I will not murder him," Kei responds.

Yui pats Kei on the head with a smile.

"Try not to," she says, and walks out, closing the apartment door behind her.

Kei turns, staring at Shinji for a long moment as Shinji shifts on the couch.

"So," Shinji says, "You're one of Rei's sisters?"

"Yes," Kei responds, "And I do not desire you sexually."

"Well, that's good, I mean..."

"However, a three way between you and Miss Sohryu would be acceptable," Kei continues, "If she was interested, of course."

"...and I was just about to say you remind me of Mom."

Kei blinks. Shinji groans, resting his face in his palm.

"Perhaps I should start over," Kei responds.

...

The synchronized swimming fell through when they realized Asuka couldn't swim. After one near drowning experience and a litany of

swears from Mana, they switched over to the DDR machine. After three rounds of Mana outpacing Asuka, Mana put her fist through the screen. It still worked, but it was a bit...well, the picture was fuzzy.

Asuka was quickly coming to the conclusion that Mana was turning into as big a bitch as her counterparts in those other worlds were. Not as much as her mother, of course. Mana needed years more experience to be as big a bitch as Mother.

"Fuck! Fucking...fuck...*fuck!*"

She was making a good show of her practice, though.

"Mana, p-please calm down," Asuka says, still in the pink and green leotard she was practicing in, Mana changed to fatigues and a t-shirt, "W-we just need to figure out how to work b-better together!"

Of course, she has other things on her mind. She hasn't visited Shinji since she got back yesterday, so she's been occupying herself with her little pet project while they're cooped up in Misato's apartment.

Another loud set of swears tells her how successful she is at reaching Mana.

"Pen Pen?" Asuka asks, "Come here."

The penguin peaks his head out of the freezer, warily staring at Mana and the DDR machine with the prominent hole in the screen, taking a wide berth around her before hopping onto the couch next to Asuka.

"What's that?" Mana asks, face still red.

"Pet project," she says, "It's an extension of how we c-can turn mental signals from Zwei into w-words. I figured we could do the same to Pen-Pen."

Closing the back of the collar with the words 'Pen 2' on it, she removes Pen Pen's collar, placing the new one around his neck. Humming to herself, she clicks on her PDA, clicking a button on it and an orange outline of itself appearing around it, the lights on the collar beginning to glow and outlining the name in neon.

"Borrowed this from our v-visitor," Asuka says, "Okay. Pen Pen, how do you feel?"

The penguin stares at Mana for a moment, raising a bushy eyebrow

before turning back to Asuka. He opens his beak, making a careful, measured warbling sound, before scratching himself behind the head with his claws.

"*Wa-I feel fine, dOOd!*"

Glancing from side to side, the Penguin narrows his eyes.

"*Wa-Okay, that's messed up, dOOd.*"

...

His right foot all the way up to the mid shin is in a cast which is resting on the living room table. Phone in his hand and resting on his ear, he waits as the dial tone rings, clicking his tongue as Kei stares at him, sitting on the desk chair by the television.

"Hi, Hikari?" he asks, and blanches, "Yeah, I know. Yes, I know it's been a while since I called. No, I haven't cut you out of my life."

He sighs, pinching his nose.

"No, I'm sorry," he continues, "Yes, I know we're friends. I've just been busy- No. No. No no no no no. I'm not angry at you for smacking me at the school. I've just been busy with the whole piloting thing and..."

He sighs, holding the phone at arms length as she continues ranting. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy. He should have realized that a bit back, when he got this idea. Somehow realizing before he dialed the phone to ask for a favor that he hasn't talked with her in two weeks and she is one of his friends.

"Get to the point," Kei says. No emotion there, no sign that she wants him to do anything. Just telling him, 'get to the point.'

"Hikari, will you just shut up for five seconds!" he yells into the phone, and groans immediately after, "No no...stop crying. Please. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I just needed to ask you something..."

He rolls his eyes. Women.

"Look," he says, "Rei and this guy are going on a date...no, it's not Kensuke...no, they haven't found a way to put her Eva in a human

sized body...no, she's not actually taking her Eva on a date, his engine ran out of power and why am I *telling you this?"*

Kei narrows her eyes.

"No, the point is, I wanted to know if you and Touji could...well...tag along with them. Yeah, I am worried. Thank you, I'm told it's sweet of me...you'll do it? Great. Misato's chaperoning. She'll pick you two up at seven. Bye."

He closes the phone, glaring at Kei.

"Happy?" he asks.

"Somewhat," she responds, "And his name is Nagisa."

"Hikari doesn't know him," he says, and sighs, "Should've mentioned he looked like Uri, though. What's the deal with him and Rei, anyway?"

"He is...infatuated with her."

He stares at her. The inflection on her voice, the slight edge of almost imperceptible bitterness.

"You've got a thing for him?" he asks.

"No."

She gets up, pacing the living room. He checks the phone, closing it and placing it on the table, clicking on the television.

"Thanks for making dinner, by the way," he says, "I'm feeling a little better. At least, not as sick. The antibiotics are working, I guess."

"Good. Hm. Would you be offended if I wanted to leave to spy on Nagisa and Rei?"

He shrugs.

"No," he says, "I'm going to take a wild guess and say that you're planning on doing that. Mom would be upset if you left because, well, since I'm in a cast I need someone to help me around. I'm guessing you planned on that?"

"Very perceptive," Kei responds, walking over and standing between him and the television, "A liberal interpretation says that if you are

unconscious, I do not need to care for you."

He stares at her. Sighing, he shrugs.

"Drugs?"

"Ambien. Four tablets. Mother uses them. I mixed them into the miso."

"Yep," Shinji sighs, "You really remind me of Mom."

His head rolls back and he passes out, already snoring. Rolling him onto his side, she takes his wallet, fishing through it for the NERV access card and bank card, pocketing them as she slips on her shoes and walks out.

"Out we go," she sing songs, "Touch my sister, Kaworu, and I touch *you."*

...

"Rei's going on a date?" Asuka asks.

Misato sighs, shrugging on her bomber jacket and checking her gun.

"Yep," she says, straightening on the black dress uniform, "And, as she is a NERV Pilot, and so is her date, I am assigned as chaperone. Which more or less means that the Commander doesn't want to do it himself. She's going out with the pilot of the Mark 06."

"Huh," Mana says, "Didn't know Nagisa liked girls."

"Yes," Misato says through grit teeth, "He does. I'm sending Aoba to watch over you two. He'll be here in an hour. Please don't kill each other while I'm gone."

"We'll be good," Mana says.

Misato sighs, pats Asuka on the head, and walks out of the apartment.

"Good and plastered," Mana says with a grin, and skips over to the cabinet on the other end of the living room. Tugging at the handle, she mutters a swear to herself, narrowing her eyes and flipping open a section of the door.

"Huh. Figures," she says, "Katsuragi has the liquor cabinet on a digital lock."

"Mana," Asuka say, Pen Pen in her lap, "What are you d-doing?"

"Making tonight fun," she says, "Ahah! Kaji's pants measurements. Little does she know I help him clothes shop."

The cabinet opens, a waft of cool air revealing row upon row of beer cans. Grabbing two cans from the cabinet, she tosses one under handed towards Asuka, who catches it and stares at it.

"*Wa-She's not going to be happy, d00d!*"

"Well, she also has her private stock of the imported stuff here," Mana says, taking out a green can with a label in german, "You gonna tell?"

"*Wa-Beaks sealed, dOOd.*"

Pen Pen waddles over, taking the can and retreating to his freezer.

Asuka continues staring at the can, narrowing her eyes as if it is going to attack her.

"But...but what are we..."

"Asuka," Mana says, walking over and standing in front of her, "Misato just left us alone, to our own devices. We're alone, we could watch TV or shit, but in all honesty this is an opportunity. Because you can be the most uptight girl I've ever met."

Asuka glares at her, raising an eyebrow.

"And I mean that in a good way," Mana says, "But as your friend, it is my solemn and dutiful responsibility to help you get out of that shell. And by that, I mean get you fucking *hammered.*"

...

Every now and then, Hikari Horaki is forced to concede that her boyfriend might not be wrong. This is a rare case indeed, as part of Touji's charm is his large heart, which helps take over for the small, atrophied brain. Indeed, when she told him they were joining Rei on a double date, and then explained to him that Rei's date was not her Evangelion, Kensuke, or an Angel that she domesticated through

caring, love, and hedgeclippers, he told her that chances are the date would be an ass.

And he was right.

This guy is a complete and total ass.

"...and that's when my studies into Aramaic progressed..."

Sitting at the table in the Tokyo-3 bistro, set in the corner, she wonders how much Shinji will pay for this. Not that he didn't mean well. He does. If anything, he's a nice guy and she admits to herself if she didn't have Touji and he didn't have Asuka she'd totally be making out with him right now *where the Hell did that come from* not that she's interested in him.

Where was she?

Oh, right. Kaworu is boring. Sure, he's pretty. Prettier than her, not that she looks bad herself. She didn't have anything fancy for short notice, so she went with her school uniform and still has her hair in her pigtails. Touji...well, this is one of the first times she's seen him wearing his uniforms, and Touji could probably break the pretty boy in two.

Rei is...well...Rei. She's not sure if Rei's wearing her uniform because she likes it or to mess with someone's heads, but that makes the suit Kaworu is dressed in stand out even more. And he just keeps *talking.* And *talking.* With words that don't mean *anything.* And she thought she was long winded.

"So," he says, after a half hour of describing what he's been doing from conception until now, "Where were we?"

Hikari glances at her boyfriend. He sighs, nodding.

"Say," Touji says, "I was gonna get some fresh air. Why don't we go talk, Kaworu?"

Kaworu nods, standing up and walking out of the restaurant. Touji glances at her, rolling his eyes, and walks out, leaving Hikari and Rei.

"So," Rei says, "Whattaya think?"

"I think he makes Kensuke oddly appealing," Hikari whispers, "What did you get me into? Who is he? How did he convince you to *date*

him?"

"Oh, him?" Rei says, and smiles, "He's tried this before. First time, I stuck a-"

...

Several blocks away, at a five star restaurant overlooking the Tokyo-3 bay, Gendo Ikari looks across the table to his wife as the waiter takes the menus, bowing respectfully to the both of them before retreating to the kitchen. Yui checks her PDA once again, Gendo sighing and placing his hand over hers.

"We agreed," he says, "No work, tonight."

She sighs, nodding.

"I know," she responds, "Pieter knows what he's doing. I worry, is all."

"It's one of your best traits," he responds with a rare smile, "But still, he is right. You haven't taken any time off in thirteen years. We can trust everyone else to fight the war for us for a week."

She smiles back as his other hand clasps over hers. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees something, looking over her shoulder to the view of the city and...

Of Kei, trekking across one of the rooftops behind them, a rocket launcher slung over her should and a machete in her hand. She looks from side to side before dropping into an alley and disappearing.

"What is it?" Yui asks.

"Nothing," he responds, as the waiter comes by again, "Wine list. Please."

...

The elevator *dings,* and Shigeru Aoba steps out, cautiously looking from side to side before walking down the open air hallway and towards Katsuragi's door. Knocking he finds the door slowly sliding open, as if it were not closed completely. Peaking his head in, he slowly, carefully walks in, sidearm out and ready. Two pilots are

under guad by Section 2 at all time, but what if...

"Asuka?" he asks, "Mana? It's Lieutenant Aoba. Katsuragi sent me to check up on you."

The fridge door opens. Pen Pen peaks his head out, waddling out in front of Aoba as the young man sighs.

"Well, crap," he says, "Now like you can tell me where they are."

"*Wa-You're too late, dOOd. The glasses girl broke them out."*

Shigeru blinks. He stares at the penguin, turns to the side and sees the small pile of beer cans on the table, and turns back to Pen Pen.

"Did you...did you just talk?"

Pen Pen tilts his head.

"*Wa-What does it look like, dOOd? I'm telling you you need to catch them, dOOd!"*

He slowly backs away, tapping open the release for the door. Backing into the hallway, he rumages through his pockets, producing a small, metal flask. Staring at it for a moment, he pitches over the side.

"Okay, I have a problem," he says, and runs out to the elevator.

...

"Soooo~oooo I was thinkin' if I could get my hands on Misato's car I could like, I dunno, hook up some LCL to the filters, maybe fill the interior with fluid then I could us it as a bumper car! How does that sound?"

"Sounds like you should've stopped at the fifth beer, Asuka."

Asuka stares at Mari for a long moment, face blank, placid. Then it splits into an ear to ear grin and she starts laughing, leaning on Mana for support, as the three walk down the empty Tokyo-3 street, Mana checking over her shoulder as Mari glares at her.

"Hey, I didn't know she was a lightweight," Mana says, "She's a weird drunk."

The Tokyo-3 downtown market district is abandoned in lieu of a possible Angel attack, most people having evacuated to the Shelters. That said, though, it does leave a good amount of the stores open through automated computers and MAGI linkups. For example, the karaoke bar Mari suggested, leading them carefully through the back alleys.

"So, anyway," Mari says, "I visited this place a week before I died."

"How was that, anyway?"

"Dying? Kind of sucked. Then I woke up in the tube. I was kind of weird to hang out in the MAGI with the Ree, though. They're fun, but Kiko kept trying to feel me up."

The Tokyo-3 Sing and Swing Karaoke Bar stands in front of them, flashing the neon sign of a badly dressed man with a microphone. Asuka recognizes the place, though. It was where that very bad date happened where they fed the guy to Rei. She just giggles, however.

"Well, alright then," Mari says, "Ladies, let's party."

She swings the door open. The lights are already on. The machine is already playing. And the individual standing in front of the main karaoke machine turns to them, rotating the three hole face.

The miniature Israfel, one foot tall and silver and green, holds the microphone in mid motion, while the four Israfels waiting in line at the DDR machine turn. The fifteen Israfels at the bar, sampling the Lilim spirits, turn to the door as well, as the thirty Israfels sitting at the varied tables, examining the chairs, and playing air hockey, turn to the three Lilim.

"Huh," Mari says, "That's not good."

...

The black ball phases through the floor in the Ikari apartment, white lines playing over it as it hovers over Shinji. It rotates, hovering around him, poking him occasionally and finding him still unresponsive.

:V!

The sphere expands into a flat disc over Shinji's head. Several miles away, another disc appears in the Tokyo-3 reservoir.

A jet of water splashes into Shinji's face, making him sputter and gasp as he sits up, glaring at Lilly as she forms back into a ball and phases back into the floor. Muttering to himself, he stumbles off the couch as the door rings, stumbling through the haze of wearing off sedative and antibiotics to swing it open.

"Hey," he says, "Figured you'd show up. What's wrong?"

A hurried explanation, as Shinji leans against the doorway.

"Okay," he says, groaning, "So...the Angel's in Tokyo-3. Asuka, Mana, and Mari have found it. It's a small army, and they're in danger. Right?"

A confirmation.

"And we have to save them," he says, "Okay. Well, let's take stock, then. Mom and Dad are out there. Rei's on her date. Kei's probably...hunting them. All my friends could be in danger and not know about it."

He takes a deep breath, vision still swimming.

"And you're a 15 foot tall spider tank remotely piloted by my sisters with a raised LCL filled piloting chamber so I won't spread this damn thing to anyone else."

In the doorway, the Reemobile raises and lowers its 16 eyed head.

"Okay," he says, and groans, "I'm hopped up on antibiotics and sedative. It's dark out, we've got an Angel in the city, a full tank of LCL..."

He flicks his wrist, a pair of amber lenses picked up from the end table in his hand, dropped from a miniscule black portal.

"And I'm wearing sunglasses."

He slides them on. A grin crosses his slightly green features.

"Let's ride."

...

They managed to make it about ten steps out of the restaurant before Kaworu yanked a brown paper bag out of his pants and started to hyperventilate. Fist closed around the opening of the bag, Touji watches as the ash haired kid doubles over, breathing in and out through the bag, tapping his foot and watching.

"So, uh," Touji says, "Womanly problems...um...meant woman problems?"

Kaworu nods, gasping as he releases the bag. Leaning against the wall, he crumples the bag and stares at it, alternating between it and Touji.

"Yes," he says, "Yes indeed. I've realized something very important."

"An that it?"

"I have *no* idea how to talk to women," he responds, "And I think I need help with that."

Touji nods, shrugging. He looks in through the window, looking to his girl and Rei and sees Rei illustrating something with hands and how her hand is being pushed through the opening made by her index and thumb and *oh my God that ain't right-*

"Mr. Suzuhara?"

Touji blinks, memories killing themselves for the sake of its own sanity.

"Yeah?" he asks, turning back to Kaworu, "Oh, right. Women. Yeah, takes a while to understand. Take Hikari, for instance. I only really started getting along with her when I started being nice to her sisters."

"Sisters?" Kaworu says, and folds his arms, stroking his chin, "Yes...perhaps if I approached Ayanami's sisters I would be able to better approach her..."

Touji shudders, his cell phone vibrating. Taking it out, he stares at the text message from Shinji, about there being an Angel in the city. Or at least, tries to, when a three fingered hand from overhead snatches the phone out of his hand. He looks up at the silver and green, one foot tall creature stares at the phone, climbing up the side of the restaurant.

"The Hell?"

"That's not good," Kaworu says, "Oh dear. Oh dear. We should, perhaps, inform Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi."

Tires squeal, and the blue alpine Renault drives by, three of the green and silver creatures at the wheel.

"An here I thought this was gonna be a boring night," Touji says, and glances to his side. Kaworu has already taken off in a run after the car.

Chapter 50: Dance Like you Want to Win!

So, taking stock. Shortly after her chat with Dr. Sohryu, Mari figured out how the S2 organ worked, patched herself up fully, and begged and pleaded with Dad until he relented and let her go out to visit Asuka and Mana. They were her sister and friend, after all. She even agreed to Section 2 watching over her.

Which she promptly ditched.

Even with Dad being military, he was never that big on discipline. Go figure. Possibly guilt over not being that involved with his other daughter's life, but dime store psychology's never been her strong point. Instead, her strong point's been more having fun and seeing how much fun you can have without, say, involving the police.

Of course, when she got to Katsuragi's apartment, Mana was on her third beer. Asuka, on the other hand, had seven. She was three sheets to the wind, trying to balance herself on the living room table so she *could* table dance, and, well, not exactly trying to be as stoic as she usually is.

The original idea was to pop in on them, spend some time, chat, that sort of thing.

But Mana was buzzed, Asuka was smashed. Perfect idea there was to just take them out and have some fun, right?

Well, that was the plan. She was not aware the Homicidal Cosmic Horror convention was in town.

Daaaamn, Ramiel. You're back, but you got uuuuuugly!

Well, there's that little wrinkle. Wait.

"Did you just call me ugly?" Mari demands.

"I ain't saying anything," Mana responds, cracking her knuckles, "Man, I shoulda brought my gun."

"Minions!" Asuka yells, clapping her hands together, "Little angel minions! It's like Christmas!"

"Okay, let's calm down here," Mari says, actively wondering at what point she had become the voice of reason, "We're all reasonable people

here. No reason anyone has to get violent, right?"

"Angel," Mana responds.

The lilim does have a point. But the lilim aren't exactly all wrong...

She's not sure what's worse, the situation or the fact that she's hearing the Angel talking in her head. But, then again, considering how she's been the past few months, this isn't the worst thing that's happened to her. Dying is.

Asuka raises her hand, parting her fingers in a V.

"We come in peace," she says, and collapses to the floor laughing. The Israfels stare at her, and turn back to Mari.

"She's wasted," Mari says with a shrug, "So...what now?"

Two Israfels look at each other and shrug. Walking over, they grab Mana and Mari dragging them towards the almost monolithic display of the DDR machine.

"They...want to do a dance off," Mari says.

"Yeah," Mana responds, "This is gonna suck."

Chapter 50: Dance Like you Want to Win!

The *Ode to Joy* plays in rhythmic beeps, and Kaworu skids to a stop, opening the cell phone and bringing it to his ear.

"Yes?"

"*Hi, Mr. Nagisa? It's Shinji. Rei's brother."*

"Oh, yes," Kaworu says, adjusting his tie as he ducks into an alley, "Hello. I was actually going to call you."

"*No problem. How's the date?"*

"Fine. Wonderful. Perfect."

His eyes dart from side to side.

"Do you have a few moments?"

"*Yeah.*"

"...how do I talk to women?"

A pause on the other end.

"*...I'm sorry?*"

"Seriously," Kaworu says, pacing the alley, "I've realized I have no idea to talk to people. I have the finest education money can buy, I have...everything given to me but I have never had to...negotiate verbally!"

"*No, no, I'm just...why do you think I know how to talk to women?*"

Kaworu scratches his head, peaking out of the alleyway, flattening against the wall as Misato runs past, screaming for the car to stop.

"Well," he says, "Your track record speaks for itself. At very least, you have some measure of success rate with the opposite sex."

"*Uh huh.*"

"And I was informed by a plausibly reliable source that you and Miss Asuka were 'doing it like the animals on the Discovery Channel' at this point."

A sigh from the other end. A pained sigh, and a muttered question about everyone he meets before he clears his throat.

"*Okay. Let's walk through this. Be honest with me. You're on a date. What's the first thing you say?*"

"I ask her to mate with me."

"*...no. No. No no no. Tell her that she's special.*"

"But she's not," Kaworu says, pacing, "She's an acceptable female genetic template for mating."

"*...Okay, tell her that. And then what?*"

"Mating?" Kaworu asks, hopeful.

"*No. No, then you talk. Talk about your feelings.*"

"Is the desire to mate a feeling?"

"...um...well...uh...you're sixteen. Yeah. Look, try this. Just talk. It has nothing to do with mating."

Right, he thinks to himself, that is a perfectly acceptable plan. Of course the problem is that when his Brother appeared he ran like Hell to find out what was going on and now he's nowhere near Rei-

"Heee~ey."

Or not.

Standing in front of him where he was sure he was alone half a second ago, Kaworu stares at Rei for a long moment, holding the open phone in his hand. This is where his fine liberal arts education tends to break down. Spectacularly.

"Rei," Kaworu says, "I'd like to talk. It has nothing to do with mating."

...

"...FUCK! You fucking...fuck...fucker!"

Mana had no idea her DDR score was even capable of getting that low. The one foot tall Israfel, on the other hand, is hopping from side to side at its resounding victory over the clumsy, uncoordinated Lilim.

So, Mana punts it into the screen.

The DDR machine flickers and dies, and silence reigns over the arcade. The Israfels turn, staring at Mana. As one, they raise their right arms, pointing an accusing finger at her as the one Mari was trying to converse with stands up as well.

"Well, crap," Mari sighs, fixing her glasses, "Think you pissed them off, Mana."

"No shit, Legs," Mana says, cracking her knuckles, "Well, about time this night got fun! Asuka! Give me some fight music!"

Stumbling over to the jukebox, she pops a handful of coins in as the Israfel divert their attention between the three girls. Tapping the touch screen and cycling through songs, her face lights up in a manic grin before she pounds her fist on the selection.

"*~I see a man in the back as a matter of fact, his eyes as red as the sun!"*

Music begins playing. Grabbing one by the arm, Mari swings the Israfel into another, backing away as their divide their attention between the two.

"*~And the girl in the corner won't let no one ignore/cause she thinks she's the passionate one!"*

Hard rock beats rip through the stereo. Vaulting over the DDR machine's railings, Mana grabs the back of a chair in one smooth motion and smashes it over the head of the nearest Israfel.

"*~Well the man in the back said "Everyone attack!" and it turned into a Ballroom Blitz-"*

...

She has an itch underneath her right eye, and the usual systems built into her suit, such as the pressurized air jets which take care of it are malfunctioning. So, she can't do a damn thing about it except ignore it. Still, there is work to do, and as she stands on the platform in front of Jet Alone Prime, she once again stares at the schematics for the giant robot. Her reaction remains unchanged.

"*What* is *this I don't even..."*

Tali sighs. She has to deal with this crap all the time, now. Their mechanical schematics make no sense. She did get a good look at Go-kun when they travelled on the Normandy, and still she can only guess it's a blatant Act of God that even keeps the Evangelions from sinking into the ground.

But this...

This is a machine.

And she still can't figure out how it works outside of someone wanting her to suffer.

"That is the usual response from people trying to repair Jet Alone."

Walking up next to her, Kyoko sips her thermos, staring at the great

mechanical monstrosity. Tali gestures, her omnitool appearing around her arm, a holographic schematic appearing in front of them.

"Remarkable device," Kyoko says.

"*I know. I've been getting used to using keyboards while I'm stuck here. Still, this just seems more comfortable. I find your use of trackballs to be cute."*

"Of course. Hyper advanced alien technology is vastly superior to something we invented to keep our wrists from popping. That and the marble in the trackball is hard enough for me to brain you if necessary."

"*Mm. You sound violent today, Dr. Sohryu."*

"My ex-husband's ex-wife is coming to Tokyo-3."

"*And for a perfectly understandable reason, to."*

Kyoko nods with a sigh.

"Have you met my daughter?" Kyoko asks.

"*In passing. I understand she has a talent for machines."*

"Yes...she does. I'd like her to apprentice to you, Miss Tali."

...

Dodging a swing, Mana plants her fist into and through an Israfel's face, hopping onto it and kicking off, spinning into a hook kick that sends another flying. Landing in a crouch, she grabs the legs of a nearby table, swinging it and the Angels standing on it, landing it on its edge and shoving it along, clearing the path as Mari ducks in next to her.

"Problems with your new siblings?" Mana asks.

"F_ you, Mana," Mari responds, "You're the one that desecrated their God!"

"They worshipped that thing?"

"Duh! Yeah!"

"...well, serves'em right."

The jukebox turns off. Squeeing, Asuka skips over to the karaoke machine, shoving in a bill and tapping through selections.

"We have to get out of here," Mari says, "Asuka's in no condition for a fight!"

"That's different, how? When she's *sober* I can drop her with a punch!"

Mari glares at her. Several Israfels circle around the table, leaping at the two. Mana ducks under, bringing up a knee between one's legs, as Mari ducks under a swing and spins into a heel kick.

"*~Everybody was Kung-fu fighting,"* Asuka sings, oblivious to the carnage, "*Those kicks were fast as lightning-*"

Mana heads butts another, Mari hitting one with a knife hand, ducking as Mana unscrews a table leg and swinging one like a baseball bat.

"*And it was a little bit frightening/but they all had expert timing-*"

Mana smashes one in the face, grabbing one by the arm as it tries to claw at her and swinging it into the table. Mari hops onto one, kicking another in the head, repeatedly kicking it before punting it away, and then finding that she is standing in the air.

"*There were funky china men/from funky chinatown* wait wait, the lyrics are-"

Asuka shrieks, ducking as the screen of the karaoke explodes. Standing on the bar, one of the Israfels has discovered the bartender's shotgun.

"You *asshole!"* Mari screams, glaring at the armed Israfel...which then explodes. As does the bar. And the wall behind it, leaving a large circular hole drilling through the next empty building.

As the red light leaves traces in the air, Mari's eyes snap open. The bar goes silent. Mana stares at her, Asuka having hidden behind one of the tables.

"Holy crap," Mana says, "You've got eye beams!"

No more mention is made of this, however. The reason, which itself is remarkable as this would be seen as a tantamount proof that Mari had in fact fully manifested some Angelic abilities, is something else

entirely. The reason the conversation drops is due to the spider tank that bursts in through the far wall.

"*Sorry I'm late,"* Shinji booms, sitting in the raised, LCL cockpit, for some reason wearing a pair of his father's sunglasses, "*Mana, get Asuka out of here! I can handle the Angel!"*

The Israfels pause, turns as one to the tank.

A blue alpine Renault slams into the other side, the doors opening and almost thirty Israfels emptying out of it. As one, the Israfels rise, pointing accusing fingers at the spider tank and the pilot. One hops onto another, the two fusing, becoming a larger Israfel. Another hops on, then another, each resulting Israfel becoming bigger and bigger.

"That's not good," Shinji squeaks.

...

The salad is shared between them, their own entrees cooling as they talk and laugh about the time they first met in college. Given, he was older and more or less a delinquent, and she was the star student, but she held her own in that bar brawl.

"I have to say," Yui sighs, "This is the most relaxed I've been in years. We should give Pieter the reigns more often."

"Maybe have him babysit Rei?" Gendo asks.

"Yes, but we want to keep him sane."

Gendo nods, smiling. Which is when, past the window behind Yui, a blue spider tank with their son in a raised, LCL filled cockpit runs by.

"*Hurry hurry hurry! Faster faster faster! They're GAINING!"*

A twenty foot tall version of the newest Angel runs past, followed by close to three dozen one foot tall counterparts. On their heels is a blue alpine Renault with Kirishima at the wheel and Asuka throwing up in the back seat, and Makinami flying after them, hanging on the antenna.

"What was that?" Yui asks, half peaking over her shoulder.

"Nothing."

The waiter walks over, leaning towards Gendo.

"More wine?"

"Yes," Gendo responds, after a moment, "Leave the bottle. And bring a gun."

...

Peeking his head around the corner, Kaworu sighs, a relieved breath escaping his throat. She wouldn't *stop* talking. On and on and *on* again, she just kept talking. And he was *fascinated* by everything she said. He was *enraptured.* If *disturbed.* At very least, Horaki and Suzuhara found them before he began to collapse from exhaustion, although he really had to find Israfel and Israfel and see if he could talk them down from destroying the city while he was there, and he escaped to activate his S2 organ and recover.

"~He~ee~ey~."

He freezes. Slowly turning, his eyes meet the red orbs staring at him. Three red orbs, in fact. Did she change? Did she evolve?

No, wait.

That's the laser pointer of the rocket launcher being held in his face.

"Kei?" Kaworu asks.

"Mm hm."

A dull pressing...right. The flat edge of the machete against his crotch. Ah, yes. This brings back memories.

"It is not normal behavior for you to become aroused by my doing this," Kei observes, glancing downward.

"Hm, yes. But I am a sixteen year old male."

"Duly noted. You are attempting to convince my sister to sleep with you. I have conflicting feelings about this course of action."

He sighs. Once again, he has to go into why his perfectly reasonable plan is perfectly reasonable.

"It's all a matter of perspective," he says, "With Rei, I can ensure the continuation of our species. Not that the scenario itself is unpleasant, and I will note that I do find Rei more than a little physically attractive...where was I?"

"You are lusting after my twin sister."

"Yes."

"My identical sister."

"Yes."

Her left eyebrow twitches. She pulls away the machete, sighing and shaking his head as he tilts his head in confusion. This only makes it hurt more when she whacks him upside the head with the flat edge of the blade.

"We're going to play a game, Kaworu," she says with a slow twitching smile, as he skitters back, eyes wide and holding the side of his head, "It's a very fun game. Do you want to know what that game is called?"

He nods, terror in his eyes.

"It's called 'Run Like Hell.'"

There is a scrambling of feet and the flashing of red light from within the alleyway, and as if all the demons of Hell are chasing after him, Kaworu runs screaming from the alleyway.

Kei casually walks out of the alleyway after him. Craning her neck, she absently pulls the sling from her shoulder and drops it, cracking her knuckles as she grins. And leaving the rocket launcher where it lay, she begins running after him.

...

"Mm...this is a really bad idea, Pieter."

"I know. That's why we're doing it."

"The Commander's going to kill you. You know that, right?"

"Danger only makes me want to do this more, Kyoko."

Rustling of cloth and a zipper moving vertically downward. The Commander's chair inside the Mausoleum is surprisingly supportive.

Makes him wonder if he and Dr. Ikari have tried this.

Her arms wrest against his shoulders, the metal frame of the chair squeaking in protest as Pieter's eyes roll up and Kyoko playfully bites her lower lip. Like two college kids house sitting, she would chide him. At least, if she hadn't already pushed him back into the chair, pinned him, locked her knees around his waist and took control.

Something Pieter realized about Kyoko years ago, and probably one of the things that drew him back to her after their years apart, is that the terminology *gentle, cuddling,* and *half measure* are foreign to her.

With Kyoko, you strap yourself in and *ride the Gees.*

"Never thought we'd break in the Commander's office," she gasps.

"Mm. Then it's all going according to the Scenario."

"Pieter, if you quote Ikari during office sex, I will hurt you very badly."

Squeaky squeaky squeaky.

"There's an Angel," she growls through clenched teeth, adjusting her position, eliciting a groan.

"Akagi can handle it," he grunts, hands finding their way around her waist, "Hyuga's got Dogma."

Squeaky squeaky squeaky.

"Good point."

"I'm Sub Director. I have a good idea every now and...*uh*..."

Squeaky squeaky squeaky squeaky squeaky squeaky squeaky squeaky squeaky squeaky squeaky squeeeaaaaaaky.

The intercom crackles.

"*Sub Director, Sohryu, urgent call from Lieutenant Aoba."*

Pieter sighs and grunts at the same time, Kyoko rolling her eyes and climbing off, fixing her skirt as he zips up his pants.

"Right," he sighs, standing up, "Back to work, I guess?"

"Back to work," she says, rolling her neck, "Fun while it lasted, Pieter."

He wraps his hands around her waist, the red material of her NERV dress uniform ruffling slightly as he pulls her in to a quick peck.

"We can break in the office later."

"Really?" she asks, and sighs, "That's what you're focusing on?"

He frowns, slightly. The frown looks...odd, unnatural on his face. His is not an visage that well wears disappointment, as the expression shows.

"I thought you liked me being spontaneous."

"Not all the time," she says, poking him lightly on the chest, "There are things I like about you, Pieter. Things I love about you. But there are also things about you that drive me to *distraction."*

She picks up her labcoat from the table, swinging it on.

"My being spontaneous got us together in the first place."

"When you told my mother to, and I quote, 'Go to Hell.' No one ever did that for me before. Everyone lived in fear of her."

He nods, grinning.

"Yeah," he says, "Old battleaxe. I see us in Shinji and Asuka."

Sighing, she clenches her eyes shut, rubbing her temples.

"So in twenty years, they could be divorced," Kyoko says, "Because either she drove him into another woman's arms or he couldn't keep himself under control, and their daughter is a stammering wreck. *Gott,* I hope they're not like us."

She turns on her heel, walking across the office towards the door. Leaving the words hanging in the air, she closes the door on the way out.

...

The spider tank skids as it turns the corner, exiting the city limits proper of Tokyo-3 and entering the open field to the west of the Fortress City. Turning as it exits onto the main road, two sets of chain guns drop down under the chin, automatic targeting taking over as the twenty foot tall Israfel closes in, one massive hand extended.

The three dozen mini Israfels on on its heels, crowding around the spider tank and pushing it back and forth, crowding it as they attempt to tip it over.

His plan to rescue his girlfriend like a knight in several tons of shining armor is not going according to plan.

"*Optic Blast!"*

A pulse of red light rips through their ranks. Several Israfels are sent flying, some blown to pieces, the Prime turning to the newly arrived car just as it plows into it.

Floating above the battlefield, Mari aims and fires once again. Unfortunately, as the last of her glasses are shattered, her aim is off.

Luckily for Shinji, the blast which slices the Reemobile in two entirely misses him, but does leave him sitting on the floor in the middle of a crowd of miniature Angels who are all now staring at him.

They all recoil, hands up defensively. They back away slowly, their three hole faces twisting, as the twenty foot tall Israfel takes a wide berth around him.

"What happened?" Shinji asks.

"The...um...Israfels are afraid of you," Mari says, eyes squinted as she feels her way around, "Since you kicked ADAM's ass. They don't understand that you don't have your Eva."

Shinji stands up, shakily. The Israfels visibly cower.

"Wait," he says, "You mean they don't know what an Evangelion is?"

"Angels have no concept of technology," Mari explains, "They think you're the Destroyer."

Don't let him get us! We don't wanna go down the hole!

"Wimps," Mari says, and sighs, "Okay, lemme explain..."

Peaking his head around the corner, Kaworu's gaze darts from left to right. He does not know why Kei is hunting him. Usually she's much more even tempered, and usually keeps her physically damaging habits to simulations. Not that he doesn't enjoy those, the cold tingling of steel as it...

No, no. Focus.

Ducking out from the alley, he runs across the abandoned, empty street, staring at the city limits of Tokyo-3. Something is happening outside of the city, though. He can sense something, something...odd, something-

HONK.

Something that is not the pick up truck that has snuck up behind him.

The lights are too bright. He can't make out the driver. Well, it does his him eventually.

The truck does. And so does the identity.

"*~He~ee~ey~.*"

The truck moves closer, Kaworu scrambling back, eyes wide as the truck deliberately matches his crawling speed.

The door opens and Kei hops out, walking to the bed of the truck and withdrawing a sledgehammer. Casually, she gives it a practice swing directly into the driver's side door, smiling as she walks over and rests the head on her shoulder.

He will admit he is becoming aroused.

"You don't approve of me dating Rei?" he asks.

"That is an acceptable interpretation of this," she responds, "We have much to discuss. We should be reasonable about our problems. Don't you agree?"

"I wasn't aware we have problems."

"I chased you around Tokyo-3 with intent to maim for fun?"

"It would not be the first time."

She drops the hammer, swinging the head down between his legs and missing anything vital as she furrows her brow and makes an odd, questioning sound which he does admit he finds attractive and wonders what Rei would look like if she did that.

"Odd," she says, "I should ask Little Mommy what this means."

Which is around when something explodes just outside the city limits.

...

"Great idea," Mana screams, ducked behind the remains of the spider tank with Shinji and Asuka, "Let's explain technology to the Angel! Let's tell them that we're sitting ducks outside of the Evas! Nothing back could possibly happen!"

They're dormant! Kill'em while they're sleeping!

Hands held up, Mari avoids thinking about Mana's curses and swears as the blasts from the small army of Angels continue pelting the AT Field with energy blasts. Each blast is minor, but there are over thirty of them, to. So this isn't exactly *easy*.

"Could use a little help!" Mari screams, "Uh...crap!"

"Holy *crap!"*

With Hikari, Touji, and Rei in tow, Misato stares at the small army of Angels as they stop and turn towards them. Hikari tilts her head as Touji mentally flashbacks to the Third Angel. Rei, on the other hand, claps her hands together and squeals.

Uh...hey, Ramiel? Why don't we let bygones be bygones and, y'know, team up?

"Not happening," Mari says, "Say, Rei? Howsabout teaching them a lesson?"

Rei grins. The Israfels shudder, stepping back, the largest of them holding up its hands defensively. They step back, as one, crowding together out of fear of the pale girl.

"I dunno," Rei says, cracking her knuckles, "I mean, killing the Angel'd

be fun and all, but usually I do that if I can hook people up, y'know? Everyone here's already paired up."

The Israfels shoulders slump. A stay of execution granted.

Or so they think.

The ground rumbles, the Angels staring down before the ground erupts in fire and force, ripping into a pillar into the sky as several hundred pounds of explosives detonte in a shaped charge. Angel parts go flying everywhere and a hastily thrown up AT Field by Rei and Mari keeps the larger chunks of debris from hitting them.

"Okay," Shinji says, "Works for me."

"Wow. The shape canister I kept the explosives in worked even better than I expected! I must say, that experiment was well worth doing."

Closing the radio detonator, Kensuke Aida whistles as he walks over, patting the stunned Touji on the shoulder and walking up to Rei.

"Kensuke," Hikari says, still staring at the hole in the ground where the Angels were standing, "Did you bury several hundred pounds of explosives outside of Tokyo-3?"

"Yes, Class Rep."

"Why?"

He shrugs.

"Wanted to lure out Rei's date and detonate them."

Hikari blinks. Misato groans.

"Jealous?" Mari asks.

"Nah," Kensuke responds, "Wanted to see how regeneration works. You know, controlled experiment."

"That sounds *awesome,*" Rei squeals, "Lemme find Kei and Kaworu! For SCIENCE!"

"AND GREAT JUSTICE!"

...

Misato shrugs.

"Guess we're giving credit for the Angel to Aida."

The new day dawns, With the blue pattern gone from Tokyo-3, peace returns to the city and the people to their proper homes.

"*So, the stupid plan made of stupid was not required?"*

"When she says it like that, I agree."

Misato stares at Kaji and Tali, muttering something under her breath about him getting an access port.

"Well, let's hope," Misato responds, "Kirishima has a hangover, Asuka caught when Shinji's got and Go-kun's still out of action, meaning Nagisa's our only line of defense right now."

Kaji nods, grinning.

"What?"

"No, it's just...Kaworu came to me to ask for advice."

He grins. A grin which fades under the fire of Misato's gaze.

...

Walking down the hallways of NERV, Kaworu raises an eyebrow as he reads through the notecards bequeathed upon him by Mr. Kaji. Many of these phrases are enlightening. In fact, some of them may be the exact wordings he should use to initiate mating.

"Kaworu?"

He looks up. Ah, yes. One of the female technicians of NERV. Miss Ibuki, he remembers her name as.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," he says with a smile.

Maya smiles back. Shuffling the cards in his hand, he gazes upon one, narrowing his eyes.

"What are those?" she asks.

"Oh, phrases that I was told to practice by Mr. Kaji," he responds, "I asked him for advice on being socially comfortable. Many of them are quite enlightening."

She smiles again. She has a habit of doing that.

"Like what?" she asks.

Staring at the card, he finally realizes what the series of blanks are for. Ah, yes. To insert name.

"Well, Lieutenant Ibuki," he says, "I was wondering if I could stick my..."

SLAP.

Chapter 51: Pest Control via Shotgun

The bottom half of the Angel disappeared during the fight with the miniature Israfels. The only conclusion they could draw was that they destroyed enough of the min-Angels to kill the Angel itself. Now, whether that was true or not was something that could be left open for debate, but Kei saw no reason to bring it up.

Let them have their fun.

She waits for the elevator to click to its destination. Her quarantine period is finished and she is now going to the apartment of Mother.. Perhaps Mother is angry at her for chasing Kaworu, but he deserved it. Mm. She does need to ask Little Mommy what these...feelings...mean. Maybe ask Big Mommy as well.

The doors slide open, and she hefts the weekend bag over her shoulder, walking across the hallway and knocking on the nondescript, completely ordinary apartment door.

"It's open!"

She slides the door open. The two of them are sitting together on the couch, an oversized blanked on their laps, the television muted while they're talking on the phone.

"No, that was just Kei," he says, "Yeah, you met her? Okay, does she know who you are?"

Shinji sighs. Asuka giggles, snuggling up next to her.

"You're like Mom," he groans, "Okay, okay. Gotta go. Love you to. Bye."

He closes the cell phone, smiling despite the fatigue on his face.

"Who was that?" Kei asks.

"Our cousin," he groans, "Uncle and Aunt's kid. We chat every now and then, keep up to date. She's a bit of a..."

"Don't say it," Yui says, walking out of the kitchen as she pulls off her rubber gloves, "Kei, good. I wanted to talk to you about something."

Kei narrows her eyes. She was always under the impression that

Mother's sibling and his wife were a childless couple. All information retrieved from the MAGI, especially following Zyuu's discovery of puberty, boys, and her attraction to Shinji, told them he did not have someone his own age in the household.

Ah. A mystery.

She will take this theory apart later, however. Little Mommy is talking.

"Katsuragi's doing cleanup," Yui explains, "So Shinji and Asuka are staying here for a bit since I'm still suspended. But when they leave, Kei, I want you to live with me and your father."

"And Rei."

"Yes, and Rei," Yui says with a smile, folding her arms, "Section 2 will be remodeling one of the storage rooms in the apartment to be your bedroom. Until then, though, you and Rei will share a room. Is that alright?"

Kei stares at her. She was warned, of course, by the Chairman, that she would be manipulated. Mustn't let down her guard. There is an angle for this, after all.

"That would be fine."

...

Many live. Many survive. Abandoning the greater Form, they have scattered, salvaging their time and exploring the Lilim stronghold. They must adapt. Many have begun to breed with local fauna. They will survive. They shall prosper.

As one pushes aside the vent cover, releasing it from the cage of duct works, it stares down freedom.

Which looks surprisingly like the barrel of a pump action shotgun.

BLAM.

"Keelah. They're like rats! How many of these things are there?"

The remains of the miniature Israfel leak out, breaking down into orange liquid and dripping on the floor. Pumping the shotgun, Tali

sighs as she fixes the vent back in place, tossing the mop over to Maya.

"So they just started showing up?" Maya asks, "Last night?"

"*I've seen worse, but I don't think the pests on the ships I've been on ever planned on genocide,"* Tali says, and slumps her shoulder, "*Is it me, or are more showing up than should?"*

"That one did have something like a bushy tail..."

"*That's a whole new disturbing level of implications."*

Maya walks over, taking out the electric screwdriver and fastening the bolts back into place.

"I'll talk with Dr. Akagi," she says, "Your shifts over any way, Miss Tali. I'll take it from here."

Tali nods, patting Maya on the shoulder.

"*Right. Tell me if you hear anything, Maya. I'll be down in the LCL tanks."*

She steps out of the storage room, two toed feet echoing as she walks down the hallway. Altogether, just another day at NERV.

Chapter 51: Pest Control via Shotgun

She is several different universes from home, on an Earth that hasn't even left for the stars yet, and somehow helping maintain giant robots that bare no resemblance to anything that should in any way work. And still, this is not the weirdest situation she has found herself in.

"*Girl, one of these days your ideas are going to get you killed."*

The helmet is resting on the edge of the clear, LCL filled tank. She made sure she was already fully immersed before she released the seals, of course. While the LCL is sterile and clean and oxygenated, the open air is not so much. Still, to be able to move around, even in a liquid environment, is a blessing for her.

If she could bring some of this technology home, it would be a miracle for her people.

Floating cross legged in the yellow liquid, eyes closed, she hums a lullaby from her youth, the sounds vibrating through the glass tank. It is a moment of peace, of certain, beautiful tranquility-

"Heee~ey."

Which is ruined when the pale hand grabs her by the ankle and yanks her through the drain.

...

The cruise ships fog horn echoes through the Tokyo-3 harbor as the latest of its stops comes to pass. She could, say, tell Zwei that there is an Angel on the ship and watch him stomp it into a floating pile the wreckage and refuse. But the keeps herself under control. She can do this. She can do this.

Pieter is all smiles. He tends to be in this case. The jackass aspects of his personality are what endeared him to her in the first place. He is much like a puppy in many ways. Cute, intelligent, curious, and with a tendency of humping things that he wants to show dominance over or when he gets excited. The latter of which tends to not work out well.

Stepping forward, Kyoko snorts. May as well get this over with. Section 2 is ready, of course. The woman's connected with the Chairman, so she gets the full escort. Shame, to. She would have plausible deniability if she wanted to shoot her right...ah, yes. Bleached blonde, curly hair which does little to hide the blatant face lift.

Green eyes, of course. Just like her daughter, and the canny smile and dressed smartly, in a business suit. Their eyes meet, Kyoko forcing a smile, if only because it's a step between no expression and the baring of teeth.

"Miss Makinami," she says.

Claire Makinami narrows her eyes.

"Have we met?"

"Yes," Kyoko responds, "My husband impregnated you."

The woman pauses. Her brow furrows, and with a forced smile, she nods.

"Ah, yes," she says, "Doctor Sohryu. No hard feelings, right? It happens."

"With Pieter, you have no idea."

The expression on Pieter's face is one somewhere between disbelief and complete embarrassment. Serves him right, Kyoko thinks. In the months since she arrived in Tokyo-3, she's never really thought of how she should make Pieter suffer, now that her priorities are straight.

"Well, I'm sure we'll have a proper good time, then," Claire says with a forced smile, "Doctor Sohryu. I hope you've been taking good care of my husband."

"Oh yes," Kyoko responds, "He's been very easy. To take care of. He's been quite...deeply...involved in his job. At NERV."

"He always did like to involve himself," Claire responds, "You know. Get down on his hands and knees and dive right in. He's always been a very hands on administrator. He takes pride in his work, keeping long hard hours and riding out assignments until they're thoroughly done."

"Oh for God's sakes," Pieter groans.

Kyoko smiles, a forced horrible thing, as the Section 2 agents retrieve her bags and walk them to the car.

"Welcome to Tokyo-3," Kyoko says, "Try not to get killed by an Angel."

"Oh don't worry about me," Claire says, lightly slapping Kyoko on the arm, "Just be careful with that man of yours. I think he still has a few children left in him."

She walks past Kyoko and Pieter, following the Section 2 agents to the car. Kyoko frowns, walking up next to Pieter as he rocks back and forth on his heels, biting his lower lip.

"Kyoko," he says, "Remember the expression, if you don't have anything nice to say..."

"I did wonder why you left me for her," Kyoko says, stretching her neck with audible cracks, "I apparently wasn't hard enough on you when we were married."

"Try not to blow your stack, Kyoko," he says, taking her hand in his own, "Really want to not have to bury anyone this weekend."

"Of course not," Kyoko says, and grins, "We'd just burn her."

...

Blinking, she finds herself sitting in the white, sterile room with seven tubes. One of them is empty. Which, of course, means she can be only one place.

"I'm in Sheol, aren't I?"

No distortion to the voice. That's not good. Hammered home when the air flickers and becomes a giant image of Rei's floating head.

"*Don't worry,"* she booms, "*The room's completely sterilized and you're the only person here! We just wanted to get some advice from you on, y'know, engineering stuff."*

Tali palms her face. Of course this isn't going to be easy. When the Ree realized they had an honest to god Alien who specialized in large weapons, they were practically climbing over themselves to play with her.

"Fine, Rei," she sighs, "What do you need?"

The face distorts, becoming a holographic map of the area underneath the Geofront.

"*Weee~ell, we were scanning the Geofront when we found a whole nest of the Israfels. We think this is where they're coming from, and they're tunneling to Terminal Dogma. So...we need to take'em out."*

Tali sighs once more.

"In case you didn't notice, Rei, I'm not exactly armed. And without my full encounter suit, the Israfels can kill me by breathing on me."

Rei smiles. It's *that* smile.

The floor parts, a rotating altar bathed in light rising. Upon it, supported and shown like a showroom floor is a great and mighty cannon, wires and pipes leading into a massive barrel half the size of Tali herself, with a yellow radiation sign emblazoned on the side.

"Oh, Keelah. You built the Cain."

"*Yep.*"

"Why?"

Another Giant Rei Head appears, this one with a headband.

"*It shoots through zip codes!*" Hatchi squeals.

"Forget I asked."

Palming her face again, she groans, muttering a curse in her native tongue.

"Well, alright," she says, hands on her hips, "Fine. But you can't expect me to just use a glorified nuclear launcher on all the Israfel, can you? Surely you have some other equipment to, right?"

The other five Giant Rei Heads appear. Tali sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, which is when the floor around her parts and the giant manipulator arms come up...

...

Getting mono could be one of the best things to happen to this relationship, Shinji considers with a small, silent chuckle. Mom and Kei are talking in the other room, and since if anything Mom trusts them both, she shooed them off to Rei's bedroom to sleep. Well, it's probably the drugs in their systems or the just plain fatigue the illness is kicking their asses with, but sleep is the last thing on their minds.

Her head is cradled on his chest, his arm wrapped around her shoulders, fingers stroking her arm. He's still in his sweats, she in that pink nightgown she always seems to wear. The television drones in the background as she happily moans, her arms wrapped around him.

"I heard," he says, "Your Mom's been coming around."

She nods, leaning up, resting her head on the pillow next to him.

"It w-will be some time," she says, "But I think she's going to t-try."

She sighs, her face pensive, eyes wandering.

"It d-doesn't change the past," she says, "I don't know if I c-can forgive her for everything she'd d-done. Sh-she knows she'll never be like your mother or Misato, but she's trying."

He nods, a smile slowly spreading across his face.

"What?" she asks.

"No, it's just...when Kaworu was asking me for advice, he said a 'reputable' source said we were 'doing it like animals on the Discovery Channel.'"

Her cheeks turn bright red. He mentally kicks himself. Her attempt to seduce him still is fresh their minds, especially the disastrous consequences.

"Sorry," he says, "It just...well, I thought it was funny. I wanted to tell him his 'reputable source' was full of crap. I don't know who it was and..."

He sighs. She blinks, face almost unreadable and cheeks bright red.

"I'm putting my foot in my mouth," he says, "I'll blame the mono if you will."

She nods, smiling, pulling herself closer to him.

"Can I ask something?" she asks.

"Sure."

"Um...Mother said, the reason you asked Misato to take me in," she says, "Was so...well...if you ever wanted to, I'd b-be down the hall and..."

He sighs, the tired smile on his face. Seeing it, her cheeks turn redder, her eyes darting down, avoiding his. She seems to turn inward for a second, biting her lip, the gears in her mind working to avoid another reaction, another episode, as she tries to not go to those dark places she knows so well.

"Was that," she says, "Was that even a little...true?"

A pause. A beat.

"Yeah," he says, "It was. Kind of."

...

They decided on a social structure similar to ants. That way they could organize, even if they didn't have a central inhabitant like a Queen that would produce more, instead creating more of themselves through consuming mass and then splitting. Repeat ad nauseum, and they've gone from twelve two days ago to over 1500.

Wait. 1490. The blast that took out the ceiling too ten of them out as well. Jets fire as the turbines built into the armor's boots spin, ejecting superheated air as she carefully guides herself down with the plasma vents built into the suit's gauntlets. She *really* had to stop giving Rei ideas.

The jets cut off as she lands. Her normal encounter suit is now a shade of silver and gray, the face plate playing data over its surface with digital holograms, telling her location and targets. Bulkier, yes, but as the Ree explained to her, very much more useful. Illustrated when the back opens and folds out a pump action shotgun, and underneath the armor, Tali grins. Another mental command and the chain gun unfolds from her left shoulder, the Cain coming up over her right. The Israfels have noticed her, backing away slowly.

"*They're like roaches,"* she says, "*Well, what's the old human saying...ah, yes. Roaches check in."*

She pumps the shotgun.

"*They don't check out."*

...

"Well, I recently learned that Asuka and her mother have started to reconcile. This leaves me in a bit of a quandry, Kei. Can you tell me why?"

Internally, not visibly, Kei smiles. Question answer is the most basic way Little Mo...Mother would test them, and a game she always excelled in compared with her sisters. She never had problem keeping focus.

"Dr. Sohryu has started employing Miss Sohryu as her assistant," Kei

responds, "As a result, your assistant is no longer as readily available. Are you now looking to hire a new assistant?"

"Yes," Yui responds, sitting across the table from Kei, "Of course, it would have to be someone who's intelligent, capable, and trustworthy."

Kei nods. Her brow furrows, thinking. How *would* make a good assistant for her? Ibuki is the best candidate, but psychological profiles indicate an attachment to Akagi. A third party, perhaps, but too much vetting. Shinji is not interested in science, which is in and of itself odd.

"In other words," Yui asks, "Would you like to be my new assistant, Kei?"

Which is when the finely tuned, oiled machine that is Kei's mind grinds to a sudden halt.

"Really?" she squeaks.

"Yes," Yui says, patting Kei's hand, "I'd like you to work with me at NERV, Kei. Do you accept?"

...

One charges. Aiming carefully, targeting sensors line up a a blast of the shotgun carves a half foot wide hole where the face was, the Israfel reverting to LCL before hitting the ground. The chain gun roars to life, peppering their ranks as another closes in and Tali puts her fist through it.

A dozen converge on each other, forming into a 10' tall Israfel. Stepping back, she levels both arms at it, two rail guns popping open and locking directly on its core...

And that's when the lights all turn red and the power indicator starts flashing.

"Out of power?" she demands, "*What do you mean, out of power?"*

Rei's face appears in the corner of her eye.

"*Weee~ell, if it was unlimited power, that'd be too easy! So this gives us drama, and action, and lets a male love interest rescue you from the jaws*

of defeat!"

"Rei, I swear to God," Tali yells, turning and sprinting out of the cavern with the Israfel in pursuit, "*I don't even have a love interest! This is a bad idea!"*

...

The alarm on his phone dings, and Pieter grimaces. Time's up. As of 5:00 pm, the suspension of Gendo Ikari as Supreme Commander of NERV is over. Looking up from the finance report, Pieter Sohryu sits back in the Commander's chair in the Commander's office and counts to ten.

On 'eight', the doors open and Gendo Ikari strides in.

"You're late," Pieter says.

"And you had sex on my desk," Gendo responds.

"Chair, actually," he responds, "I seize opportunities. Welcome back to NERV, Commander."

Gendo nods, gesturing towards the side door.

"Come with me," he says, "It's time to meet the Fat Lady."

...

He really is comfortable right now. So much so that he doesn't mind how deeply he's put his foot in his mouth. Of course, Asuka went silent when he confessed that, yes, him wanting to bone her may have had a small part in him convincing Misato to let her move in. He didn't use those exact words, though. He's not that bad.

Usually.

"So...yeah," he continues, when he really shouldn't and he blames the drugs more than anything, "That was one of my arguments, actually. I sort of told Misato that yeah, you're really beautiful and it'd be great to have someone like that in the apartment...stop me at any time."

Her face turns redder. Her fingers are tapping together and her eyes

are wide. There is a good chance she's a lot more lucid than he is right now. That is a relatively bad thing from his perspective, as warped and blurry as they perspective is.

"Yeah," he says, "I should stop."

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose as she continues staring at him. So wrapped up in his own verbal clusterf_ that he doesn't notice the grin spreading over her face in a slow, deliberate manner.

Well, he does, soon enough.

Especially when Asuka puts her hand down his pants.

...

The numbers click downward in the lift's LCD display, soon going past 01, the floor for the Project E labs, and clicking into letters. Level A, level B. They're past level X, going past Z and into level AA.

"We're approaching level EE," Gendo explains, "The Non Disclosure Agreement you signed extends your clearance so you're allowed here, and Sheol, without being shot. Should an Angel ever reach this level, the base is set to subsequently self destruct."

"What about Sandalphon?"

"Mind control. Had us turn off the automated systems so it could reach Terminal Dogma. More particularly, it was after what is beyond Terminal Dogma."

The counter clicks again. Level ZZ-just above the Earth's mantle. The doors slide open, leading to the simple catwalk over the tunnel, a river of LCL flowing beneath their feet.

"So this is where the Angels keep trying to get to," Pieter says, walking alongside Gendo, "Seems...plain. Why do the Angels keep trying to get here?"

"What we have down here," he responds, leading him through the tunnel, "Is something that only a few people know about. Myself, Yui, Dr. Akagi, and by retroactive Dr. Sohryu. And, of course, Rei."

They approach the end of the tunnel. Pieter whistles as he sees it, the massive double doors large enough for two Evas to fit through side by

side. Locks and symbols are pasted over it, the great golden doors sealed against all who come before it.

"When the Ree refer to Little Mommy, who are they talking about?"

"Dr. Ikari," Pieter responds.

"And Big Mommy?"

Gendo takes out his PDA, cycling through screens.

"I presume they mean Naoko Akagi," Pieter says, hands folded behind him, "Because she created them, right?"

"Close," Gendo says, "But the Ree emulate a different sort of Mother. Vocal recognition. Open Heaven's Gate."

The locks release with audible, deafening snap. Great doors and gears grind, leaving sparks along the railings as the walls of gold and iron part, releasing the dim red and orange glow into the artificial clearing.

"Holy God," Pieter mutters.

"Close. Maybe a distant second."

For a moment, locking eyes with the seven eyed mask upon the white giant with half of its body missing, Pieter could swear it was staring back. Maybe smiling, to.

"An Angel?" he asks, "We have an Angel down here?"

"Not an Angel," Gendo responds, "Not...technically. This is less an Angel and more a counterpart to ADAM. This is Lilith."

...

Full speed, she runs through the tunnels, the thousand screeching miniature Angels on her tail. She swears, she swears to the Gods her people worship that she is going to strangle Rei when this is over and done with.

Presuming she isn't killed and eaten by the Israfels, of course.

"*Rei! This is not funny! Turn my suit's power back on, NOW!"*

"*Can't do that. Oo, wait! Just about a hundred more meters, then your backup arrives!*"

She swears to herself, more violently and thoroughly than she usually would expect herself to. Well, that's what life is like with constant exposure to Rei, after all.

"*Fine! Then turn back on my weapons systems!*"

"*Weee~ell that's the idea, silly!*"

"REI!"

The ceiling up ahead explodes. Skidding to a stop just past the hole, she stares as the rope line falls through and two blue haired girls in blue and red sailor fukus drop through.

"Monster!" Zyuu calls out, "I came baring love for all men!"

"And I for all women!" Kiko adds, "Through the power of Love, you will be defeated!"

"*Oh, Keelah,"* Tali moans, palming her helmet, "*Love?"*

Which is when the two girls heft up the launchers and switch on the tanks strapped to their backs.

"And *Napalm!"*

"Well, that's a little more sensible..."

Two jets of concentrating sticky fuel and flame shoot out, Tali folding her arms as she watches the two girls fumigate the tunnel with fire and death. Honestly, they work well together, and she even sees how Rei's plan was designed to work.

"*USE THE CAIN!"*

Rei is much more sensible than they give her credit for. Maybe even as smart as her human mother.

"*USE THE CAIN!"*

Sighing, Tali unlocks the cannon from her back, hefting up the massive weapon as, conveniently, the exo skeleton of the suit powers back up.

"*Alright,"* she says, "*Fine. I'll use the Cain."*

Five girls squeal in joy over the headset.

"*BOOM FOR THE BOOM GOD!"* Nana screams.

Two latches disengage, safety features switching off as Tali hefts up the weighty cannon and pulls back both triggers. A rigged N2 reactor begins churning to life, several magnetic rails taking place of what would normally be a mass reactor and gathering a red glow at the front of the foot wide barrel.

Zyuu and Kiko grin, sprinting over behind Tali. Both girls brace against her, as the cannon recoils back and the red sphere shoots out at a fraction of the speed of light. It impacts in the midst of the charging Israfels, the explosion causing the filters to engage on her helmet to full opaque, clearing as the shockwave buffers them and they open their eyes to find the cavern clear.

"*Well, that worked,"* Tali says, breathing easier, "*Now we just need to-*"

Which is exactly when the floor collapses beneath them.

...

"Lilith was found with the Geofront," Gendo explains, walking with Pieter past Heaven's gate, as the automated ship patrolling the LCL lake briefly points its cannon at them, "It is, as far as we can tell, over four and a half billion years old."

Pieter sputters, staring at Gendo for a moment.

"Four and a half...billion? How's that even possible? There was life, then?"

Gendo nods, staring at the giant white creature.

"We think that's when she arrived on Earth," he explains, "First Impact. The Theta Impact theory, which states that a rogue planetoid hit Earth, creating the moon."

Lilith's head turns slightly, towards them. Like a twitch of an eye on a normal person, on a giant over 200' tall it is more noticeable.

"Lilith and ADAM arrived then," Gendo explains, "In theory. The White

Moon ended up in Antarctica, the Black Moon ended up here. The Black Moon contained Lilith, and from there life was seeded on the Earth."

"That's not possible. Humans originated in Africa."

"Not human life, Pieter. *Life."*

Hand folded behind him, Gendo grins. He gazes, almost reverently upon the White Giant, the Origin, before them.

"Following First Impact, life was seeded on the planet. Humanity is the culmination of that which comes from Lilith. We are different from the Angels for this reason."

"Well, great. We got the short end of the stick. Junior can phase through walls but we die if we laugh and eat at the same time."

"We also understand technology and can create. That's our gift; drive and imagination. No Angel can match that."

"Explains why we've been winning," Pieter says with a shrug, "Human adaptation. Taming wild animals. I guess that makes sense."

"Taking this in stride, Pieter."

"I figured we had something down here the Angels were going gaga over."

Gendo nods.

"We let the Angels believe it was ADAM," he explains, "It isn't. Given, they figured that out when ADAM came to NERV to kill us all, so now they have different goals."

"Such as?" Pieter asks, "Well...then why did Sandalphon go to Terminal Dogma? What did he want with Lilith?"

"Possibly combine with Lilith and become a sort of God," Gendo says, "We don't know. The Angels shouldn't be interested in Lilith. If anything we believe Lilith is a rival to ADAM. The idea that ADAM and Lilith should not be on this planet is one that's been bandied about in Project E, but that can wait. This is NERV's greatest treasure and secret."

"And presumably as insane as the Ree," Pieter sighs, "I take it that's one of the reasons she's nailed to a cross?"

"Lilith doesn't have an identifiable gender, and she was like it when she got here. The Lance is a new addition," Gendo says, "And yes, it's the general presumption that Lilith's personality is similar to Rei's."

"Do we have any more nails?"

Gendo smirks. He waits, for a moment, waiting for the next question to surface.

"Where's the rest?" Pieter asks, "I only see half of it."

"The rest is Unit 01," Gendo responds.

The question on Pieter's lips would be somewhere along the lines of 'What do you mean, Unit 01 is half of God?' The question is not asked, however.

Mainly because that's when one of the vents in the ceiling caves in and Tali, Kiko, and Zyuu fall into the LCL lake below.

...

With some effort, Shinji managed to get Asuka's hand out of his pants. He's not sure if he actually wanted to, but the fact is that his mother and Kei are in the next room, and this is Rei's bed. She'd know, of course. Everyone would know. Mom has cameras everywhere, right?

"Hold on," he breathes, one hand pinning Asuka's offending hand to the pillow as the medicated and maybe hung over redhead tries to pry herself free to continue doing...things...to him, "Mom's right outside! We can't-"

"Why not?" she pouts.

"We're *sixteen*."

"You're like the only guy I know who uses the 'we're underage' line to convince a girl to *not* have sex with you."

Asuka squeaks and Shinji groans, both sitting up on the bed as Mari stands in the doorway, Kei and Yui peaking over her shoulder. Yui gives him a muted thumbs up as Kei tilts her head for a better view, and Shinji just palms his face and groans.

"Well," Yui says, lightly elbowing Kei to get her to stop staring, "Now

that we're all here, we should have a chat. Judging from what happened last night..."

She places her hands on Kei's shoulders.

"I think Kei needs to have a something explained to her."

"Which is?" Shinji asks.

"Boys."

Chapter 52: Chained Gods

The black monoliths appear in the virtual room. It is the one labeled 01 that begins, as always. No others are present. None others are required, for the next few moments. It is only them, the secret masters of the world.

01: We begin this meeting of the Council of SEELE. Report on the latest progress of our resources.

10: Construction of the Mark 08 is almost finished. All we need is to format the Core and find an acceptable subject and it will be ready.

08: The first of the Mass Production Series is ready for test activation, Chairman. The S2 engine will receive a thorough breakdown.

06: Following that, which I may add is against my better advice, we will replicate the S2 organs for the rest of the Eva series. Unit 03 is en route from NERV-Boston to the southwest facilities.

.07: And once more we are concentrating all our Evangelions on a single spot. Once more, I must raise protest that the Scenario is not as reliable as we thought. Do we have any guarantee that the Angels will continue to target Tokyo-3?

06: I remind the Committee to review my theory on the Cherubim behavior.

05: In all do respect, 06, I find it hard to believe that Angels can behave in that petty a fashion. Chairman, the PAWN series will be ready to be deployed within two weeks time. Final debugging of the software will be complete by then.

A pause from the monolith labeled 01.

01: Gentlemen, this meeting is adjourned. The Mark 06 is on final approach to NERV-2. We will reconvene in two hours.

The virtual reality display fades, the mechanisms retracting into the floor around his desk. Rising with the whirring of gears, Lorenz Kihl grips his walking stick and begins his walk out of the book lined office he keeps on premises on NERV-2. On paper, he is a civilian contractor. In reality, Director Hertz answers to *him*.

"Chairman," the girl says, waiting for him at the doorway with a bow,

"Mr. Kaworu will be pleased to see you waiting for him."

"I imagine not, child," Kihl says, walking alongside Annette as they exit the room, "I was forced to shoot Ms. Ayanami before they left, and it is a poorly kept secret that he has become attached to her. Like he has to you."

"Then I can only hope I do not give you cause to shoot me, Chairman."

He grunts an acknowledgement, the two exiting the dome as the head of the Mark 06 descends past the lip of its underground hangar. Which is when the black clouds gather in the distance over Berlin. And every alarm begins going haywire.

...

...

...

YOU ARE, ALL OF YOU, GARBAGE.

Born of hate and refuse. Born of greed and fear.

Your works of civilization are the mad ramblings of the already dead.

You worship us and discard us.

And now we have come to discard you.

I am the Interrogation of God

Angel of Silence

I am Shateiel.

I am here.

Chapter 52: Chained Gods

The Tokyo-3 municipal park has been visited at this point by three professional exorcists, a few professional investigators from Manhattan-2, and several priests in an effort to 'purify' the area. More or less, since ADAM's attack several months earlier, the park had been a nexus for weird crap.

Today is no exception.

It starts as a pinprick of light. It expands outward, forming into a sphere and shaped much like an egg, cracks of light issuing forth as the trees in the immediate area of the park bend backwards and down, the cement cracking as the pedestrians stare in absolute, dumbfounded shock.

The egg folds in on itself, the light blinding for a moment. As the light clears, the silhouettes of five people become distinct. Well, five humanoids. At least two of them are most definitely not 'people.'

"*Transit completed, Shepard Commander."*

"So, Earth? Hm. Quaint. Interesting. More active biosphere than I was lead to originally believe. Fascinating. Reading the effects of massive particulate-*mmph!"*

The woman in the black, green piped armor clamps her hand over the mouth of the brown and white skinned alien in the white and black uniform resembling a doctor's coat.

Tapping the depression on the side of the full head concealing helmet, plates retract into the recesses of the collar, revealing a young woman with short cropped red hair and faintly glowing orange scars.

"Ah, crap," she says, "We've been spotted."

Behind her, the taller man in the high collar blue armor and sloped helmet taps her on the shoulder.

"I got this."

He holds up a three fingered hand, parting his two fingers and pulling off the helmet to reveal a face of silvery, scaled skin, deep recessed black and blue eyes and a pair of twitching mandibles over a beaked mouth.

"Greetings, people of Earth!" he says, "We come from a far off universe, from a world much like your own! Take us to your leader!"

Which is all the crowd needs to start screaming and running. This is then followed by several dozen people in black suits climbing out of the bushes and bent over trees and behind the light posts and aiming automatic weapons at the five of them.

"*Shepard Commander,"* the tall, thin, cycloptean robot says, extending the plates over its eye, "*This is not an advisable situation."*

"No shit, Legion."

She turns to the final member of her group. The six and a half foot tall turtle shelled humanoid blinks bright blue eyes and grins, cracking his knuckles.

"Grunt!" Shepard yells, "Sicc'em!"

With a roar, Grunt charges, laughing as automatic fire pelts him and doing little more than tickle.

"I really don't know why I listen to you, Garrus," Shepard sighs.

"Sometimes I have good ideas," the beaked alien responds.

"Name them."

"*No record found."*

*"*Shut up, Legion."

Tapping his forearm, an orange sphere and paraphernalia appears as the doctor alien brings up a floating, holographic map, stepping out of the way to avoid being hit by a flying Section 2 agent.

"Fascinating," Mordin Solus states, "We are apparently above a large hollow structure that extends into the planetary mantle."

"Fascinating, I'm sure," Garrus says, disengaging the compact oval from his back and snapping it out into an assault rifle, "But I'm pretty sure we're not here to survey. What's the plan?"

Jane Shepard, Commanding Officer of the SSV Normandy-2, allows herself a small grin as she considers exactly what sort of crazy she's landed into this time.

"Plan's simple," she says, "We're going to find to access port to that subterranean structure, infiltrate it, and at five people strong, storm a fully staffed and armed military compound. And we're going to find

our crew member and get her home."

"And here I thought we were doing something stupid," Garrus deadpans.

Shepard slaps Garrus on the back with a small chuckle.

"Day's young. Let's move."

...

NERV-2, East of Berlin. Alarms blare as the wind whips about them, crackling electricity filling the sky. They can see a faint outline of something resembling a sphere in the sky. Something massive and horrifying filling the sky, descending upon them. It was around them figuring out it was easily the size of an Evangelion that their equivalent to Section 2 came for him, transiting him from the Makinami estate to NERV-2.

Something in Uri's gut fills with dread. Something stirs deep inside him, some deep loathing and fear.

Angel. An Angel is coming. He's not sure if he's scared, or anxious or...or maybe even excited.

"Annette! Uri!"

Hair still sticky from LCL, eyes bloodshot from the flight over, Kaworu swears under his breath as he runs out of the hangar, grabbing Uri by the sleeve as Annette bows slightly.

"What are you doing here?" he demands.

"I had Uri brought to NERV-2," Annette explains, "It's the safest place to be during an Angel attack. There aren't shelters like there are in Japan."

Kaworu sighs, already weary. No time to argue, he things, squeezing on Uri's arm and pulling him towards the hangar, Annette in pursuit.

"Come with me," he says, "There are deep ground shelters near the Mark 06's hangar. Let's go!"

...

The Cherubim resembles an oval of green crystal, two orbs like Cores at either end. From the Command Bridge at NERV-2, there is chaos. None of the personnel here are trained in repelling Angel attacks, not really. As the lighting crackles over the surface of the alien monster, Lorenz Kihl narrows his eyes against his visor and takes in the details of the creature, thumb stroking the red gem set into his walking stick.

"Chairman," Director Hertz, an older, proper, formally trained and therefor useless soldier says, "We really should get you somewhere safe."

"This is safe," Kihl responds, "We are lucky the Cherubim chose today to attack. Now we will see the full capabilities of the Mark 06."

...

A stray bolt of lightning strikes the base. More than lightning, enhanced by the Cherubim's AT Field and in born rage, it strikes like a physical thing. The hangar shakes, catwalks loosening and on instinct, Uri grabs Annette by the arm, pulling her back as the underground building rumbles and metal around them creaks.

A support beam comes loose as another bolt strikes, Uri diving out of the way, pinning Annette as the girl shrieks, and with a sickening crack and the sound of meat hitting the floor they look up to see Kaworu holding the bleeding gash on his forehead, groaning as he lays on the floor.

"Oh, it's not even trying to be subtle," Uri breathes, looking up, staring at the 200' tall figure surrounded by catwalks and supports, "Fine. Annette, help me carry him."

Uri pads over, pulling up Kaworu by the arm, tossing one arm over his shoulder as he begins walking towards the Mark 06, up the stares as the building shakes and the Entry Plug looms over them.

"Wha...what are you doing?" Kaworu breathes.

"Getting us somewhere safe," Uri responds, "One of the first things I was taught at NERV is that there's nowhere safer in an Angel attack than an Evangelion. How fast can you heal."

"...right to the head. Hour, two."

"Not fast enough," Uri sighs, placing his hand on the computer screen to his right as Annette wraps Kaworu's other arm around her shoulder, "Come on, we're practically twins..."

"*Recognized; Pilot. Entry Plug access granted."*

The hatch spins open, excess LCL splashing on the catwalk. Pulling the A-10 connectors from Kaworu's hair, he fits them on his head, helping Annette carry Nagisa in and floating him on the orange liquid.

"Come on," Uri says, stepping into the plug, the blood like liquid cold against his skin, "Let's go!"

"Me?" Annette asks, glancing from side to side, "Uri, I...I never..."

"Annette, I'm not leaving you out here," he says, and grabs her wrist, "Come on!"

...

"Berlin," Yui says, standing in Central Dogma as Kyoko walks in, padding over to her, "Why would an Angel attack Berlin?"

"It may be after the Mark 06," Kyoko responds, "Some theories state that it is a lobotomized Angel. Could be a rescue."

"But it's a Cherubim," Yui sighs, folding her arms, "And we have no idea what drives them..."

...

The lights flicker on. The decision was easier than he thought. He swore, some time ago, to never get back into an Eva. Not until he was ready. Fate is forcing his hand today. The restraints are tight. Annette is in the seat with him, holding on. Much like that time on the *Rainbow*. How his sister and Ikari first met.

Only thing is, his synchronization score never even came close to Ikari's. Never will.

"Begin manual activation," he says, flicking the switches on the sides

of the seat, "Stage one. Release muscular locks and set language to German. Stage 2. Set Plug Depth at 2.04 and ionize LCL."

He grits his teeth. He feels the pulling at his mind, at his soul. The back of his neck itches.

"Annette," he says, "Whatever happens, hold on. Don't let go. I can try to get us out of this alive."

She nods, her arms wrapped around him.

"It's okay," she says, "I trust you. You're trained in this."

He nods. Trained, yes. Miserable track record, but trained and drilled and made into his entire life. Then that life collapsed around him, didn't it? No time for that. No time for regrets.

"Stage three," he says, wrapping his hands around the butterfly controls, "Synchro sta-"

His vision becomes a tunnel of light and sound. A connection, a spark, as the core beats below him. His mind dumps information, visions of his past playing before him. Death, rebirth, childhood and abandoned adulthood and responsibility. Screaming at the death he caused, his regrets and inadequacies a slideshow of horror and mockery before him as the tunnel finally empties and he sees eyes in dark parts of his mind.

Are you fighting for something?

A voice like his, but deeper, echoing and godlike.

Are you fighting for someone?

Faces, too many to count. Six red eyes in a diamond shape stare back at him, retracting and forming into a great winged giant.

You are like him, but different. He says that he fights for his kind, for his brethren. But never gives a name. But I see who you fight for.

A face. Stern and unforgiving but one which he owes everything. *Mother.*

A face. Timid, but hidden strength and intelligence. Guilt over how he treated her. *Sister.*

The hands around his chest tighten. A moment, called back into reality, the whiff of strawberries in her hair.

Ah. You have a reason. You have people to protect. Let's give you a chance, Uriel.

The A-10 connectors glow, the pulse of pounding Core beneath him bringing him back to reality.

"**Fourth Child Recognized.**"

His eyes glow red, a rush he never knew existed filling him, awakening him.

"**Synchronization at 137%. Evangelion, Mark 06."**

Outside, two red eyes glow beneath the orange visor.

"Rise."

...

"I'm in their ductwork. Proceeding to rendezvous point. I'll try not to take anything with me, of course. Scout's honor."

The tactical cloak switches off, her eyes and the implants adjusting to the darkness of the air vent as she crawls along, inertial dampeners built into her gloves and boots masking the sound.

Kasumi Goto, master thief, treasure hunter extraordinaire, and now cross universal traveler (who always thought it was a fantastic idea to versify her resume) speeds along the air ducts of NERV-1, silently tracing the omni-tool signature of their comrade.

Of course, this is a bad idea. She expressed as much of an opinion in her flippant, humorous way, but this is a very, very bad idea. She knows what's waiting for her here, in the ducts, and that's why she volunteered. She's here to keep her attention while the others infiltrate the base, mainly because she knows that there are many things to describe the biggest threat in NERV, and murderous isn't one of them.

At least, not to her friends. After all, she-

"Heee~ey."

Right behind her. She's been following her, even invisible. She has to ask her how she does that.

"What'cha doin'?"

She turns. Red eyes glow in the darkness.

"Hello, Rei," Kasumi says, "Just doing a job for a friend. You wouldn't happen to know where Tali is, would you?"

"Yep! We can take you to her!"

Kasumi pauses. Easier than she thought. Well, deep down Rei is a good girl and wait did she just use a plural?

"We?"

She looks in front of her. Another pair of red eyes. And another. And another.

"Oh, I am not paid enough for-"

...

"Kasumi's encountered the Ree," Garrus says, peering past the scope of his assault rifle as he turns the corner, gesturing forward as Mordin walks behind him, omni-tool still glowing, "If I remember correctly, Rei has seven sisters, right?"

"*Correct. It may be considered agreeable to not provoke them."*

"Yeah, I'm agreeing with Legion," Shepard says, flattening her back against the next corner, motioning Garrus forward, "Okay. Quiet, everyone."

Heavy pistol in both hands, she scans the corridor. They found an access tunnel to the Geofront soon enough, disabled the security detail and made their way in. Everything is planned. Guns are set to Sledgehammer rounds; high speed concussive rounds designed to knock unconscious via force and hypo-injected sedative.

No one has to die. Sure, they're hopping across an entire universe to rescue their comrade, but if these are Rei's people, then she knows

they're good people. And they wouldn't have harmed one of hers, so she doesn't have to-

O.o?

"What the Hell was that?" Shepard asks.

The black sphere flicks in front of her. Floating at level to her gaze, it rotates, about the size of a baseball.

"Fascinating," Mordin says, "A spacetime bridge in mobile form. Fascinating."

"Yes, this is definitely Rei's world," Garrus says, "I think we're being tracked."

Shepard nods, peaking over the corner again, tapping down a glowing orange visor and shifting into infrared.

"So," she says, "Seven of them? We could have eight Reis tracking us?"

"The scientific classification is Ree," Mordin corrects.

Grunt stomps in after them, shotgun in hand. Garrus motions him to be quiet, to approach slowly, as Lilly turns towards the turtle like alien and examines him, floating around him casually.

8D!.

Which is when the pale white hand bursts from the overhead vent and yanks Grunt in.

"Oh, that poor boy," Garrus intones, "He's in for a life changing experience when the girls realize he regenerates."

...

The horns rise first, the three slopes of the Evangelion's head as the force of the AT Field rips the catwalks from the wall, surrounding it in a cyclone of metal, near-sonic accelerated air and pure, elemental force. The moorings of the hangar doors tear and rip off, surrounding the Mark 06 like two spinning shields.

The dual horn mounted upon its snout vibrates like a tuning fork, the visor glowing a baleful red as the gold jet stripes lining its arms and

waist shift to a glowing white. Panicked screams over the comm systems, Uri hearing them realize that, no, Nagisa is *not* piloting the Mark 06.

And then the sky shifts. The Cherubim senses them as the Mark 06 rises above NERV-2, the AT Field coalescing around it as the metal descends towards the Earth in a rain of debris.

An arc of lightning crosses the distance between Berlin and NERV, deflected and crackling against the wall of orange that raises itself before the Mark 06. Eyes beneath the visor narrow, and will becomes force, cancellation of gravity, and the Evangelion takes off with a crack of thunder towards the Cherubim.

...

"***You join him with the other half of your soul, Tabris,***" the voice booms in the back of Kaworu's head, ***"We will let this stand. The Cherubim are abomination. They must be destroyed. Should you raise your hand like this against an Angel, though, I will destroy you myself!"***

Standing in the open field, Kaworu stares at the Mountain which speaks with Thunder. Barely drifting back and forth between consciousness, he bites back the bile he wishes to speak to him with. Such is not wise. Not with him.

"This is necessary," he says, "My body is injured. Only he can pilot."

"***Or you could shed your meat and bone and destroy the Cherubim with a snap of your fingers."***

...

It clears the clouds. A shape of a long green rod, two spheres shaped like Cores hovering on either end. The Cherubim has arrives, drawing power from the lines underneath it as it advances towards NERV-2 with the speed of a passenger plane.

Reaching his mind outwards, Uri connects to the Core. A wall of orange light comes up, blocking the blasts of electricity before the

speed picks up, the Mark 06 accelerating upwards with the Cherubim in pursuit.

"Fine, it's chasing us," Uri growls, "Now tell me what you can do to kill it!"

"**I can manipulate my AT Field to a degree not possible by standard Evangelions."**

"Great! Wonderful! How does that help me?"

The Mark 06 halts in mid air, the orange field around it lighting up, forming into a sphere that fits into the palm of the Evangelion's hand. The sphere flashes as the hand closes, forming into a rod, on which one end sits a bladed axe head.

"Okay," Uri says, "Works for me."

...

Two Section 2 agents drop, the blue residue of the slugs dissolving as Garrus motions the others forward, Mordin next to him as he peers across the corridor, Shepard on the other side. She holds up a finger, tapping the side of the pistol and the lights around the barrel glowing faint blue.

Peaking over the corner, she aims and fires. The snap frost covers the cameras, shorting out the surveillance as she motions everyone forward.

"Okay, here's a bad thought," Garrus says, "I was honestly expecting a lot more resistance. What if they know we're here and they're waiting for us?"

The double doors ahead of them open. Misato Katsuragi walks out, gun aimed at them, Mana next to her with an assault rifle and twenty armed Section 2 agents behind them.

"Yeah," Misato says, "What if?"

"Crap," Garrus mutters.

"*Agreed,"* Legion responds.

Shepard growls, a wall of blue coming up between her soldiers and

the armed security agents in front of them.

"Mordin, Garrus," she says, "Fine Tali. Legion, you're with me."

Garrus, nods, tapping his shoulder. He fades into an outline, and is gone, Mordin disappearing with him. Legion stares at them, eye glowing for a moment before the vents on either side of the wall open up and slam the Section 2 agents against the wall in a flood of Bakelite.

"Well, that's better," Shepard says with a smirk, "Legion, split up. You take the girl."

"Mana, kick the robot's ass," Misato says, "I've got the bitch."

Shepard raises an eyebrow, holstering her pistol.

"You really want to do this?" she asks.

"You invade my base, you knock out my men, and you have the freakiest looking sidekicks I've seen since Sub Director Sohryu started palling around with Junior," Misato responds, "Hells *yes*."

Shepard holsters her pistol as Misato charges, launching off her right foot and into a kick right at Shepard's face-

---

...

The axe comes down, cleaving through the Cherubim's AT Field and slicing into the green crystal skin, making it squeal before blasting the Mark 06 in the face with a blast of electricity. Lights are dimming in Berlin beneath them, going silent as more and more power pours into Shateiel.

Inside the plug, Uri roars. He feels *ALIVE* today. He feels *WHOLE.* Is it possible this is the result of Eva? Is it the Mark 06, the caged God obeying his every wish?

"Look out!"

Brought from the brink by Annette's scream, he wills the Eva to bank, a hard left to avoid the pillar of lighting shooting skyward from one of the red cores. Cores. Does it have more than one core?

"Nagisa!" Uri shouts, "How do I kill it!"

"Mrgl..."

"I think he's unconscious," Annette responds, "If he...wait, if he falls unconscious then..."

The lights dim. A timer reading five minutes appears on the right side of the plug.

"Oh, f_ me," Uri growls.

"Not until we're married."

Uri stares at her. Annette smiles, faintly, shrugging.

"Sorry. Trying to lighten the mood."

Both scream as the Cherubim interrupts the conversation with a blast to the Mark 06's chest, Uri feeling the hairs on his chest crackling under the head before the Mark 06 is knocked from the sky. Flight gives out, the shields giving out as the AT axe fades from the Mark 06's hand and it plummets towards the ground below.

...

"Not good," Lorenz Kihl growls to himself, "What are you doing, Nagisa?"

Was that concern in the Chairman's voice, the Director asks himself. Well, the boy is the Chairman's ward, as much as the statement seems odd. But, the cynical man in him tells himself, it's probably concern for his investment in the whole thing and-

"Oh, damn," he says, as a new set of alarms blare, "What's happening?"

"Evangelion MP-1 has activated!"

...

The container bursts, flooding the facility deep beneath NERV-2 with LCL. Whie feared wings, glistening with gold and amber unfurl, beady black eyes taking in light and sensation for the first time. The soft, monotone voice echoes in the back of its mind, the white figure rising as the technicians watch in dumbstruck horror, shock, and admiration.

After all, they were curious on just whether or not it would work.

Mother's instructions. Mother's words.

Save.

Muscles tense. The S2 engine pours liquid fire through its veins.

Your.

Hands wrap around the black handle.

Father.

With a tensing of muscles and thrust of its wings, the white Evangelion burst through the ceiling, through layers of armor and into the sky. Hefting the black double blade in its hands, the first of the Mass Production Evangelions launches itself towards the battle.

...

"Crap! Crap! Crap!"

Slamming the butterfly controls as the Cherub gets smaller and smaller as *the Evangelion falls towards the ground,* Uri can't help but get deja vu and wonder why he always seems to choose the defective Evangelions.

The belt pops off and Annette climbs onto him.

"What are you doing?" he asks, noticing that, with the way she's currently straddling him he has a good view of her cleavage and *wait, we're still falling* and then notices her climbing over him.

"I'm going to wake up Mr. Nagisa," she says, and pushes off, floating towards Kaworu, "Hold on."

She floats over to him, gently taking him by the collar. Almost tenderly, she places her hand on the side of his face, the other hand on his shoulder...

And then she knees him between the legs as hard as she can. Uri throws up a little in his mouth as Kaworu's eyes open with an almost inhuman scream, and the timer disappears.

"That did it!"

His eyes glow red and the Evangelion straightens up, stopping its fall a hundred meters above NERV-2, launching itself skyward once more as a white Evangelion rises alongside it, one hand carrying a great double sword, and the other something Uri recognizes quite well.

"Is that a Positron Cannon?"

"Makes sense," Kaworu gasps, "Similar...to Ramiel..."

Tossing the double blade at the Mark 06, Uri wills it to deftly catch it as the White Evangelion hefts up the Positron cannon, leads leading all the way down to NERV-2 crackling with ozone as the light gathers at the barrel.

With a burst of light and a crack of thunder, the beam shoots out, crossing the sky and slamming into the AT Field, crackling against it as the light briefly outshines the sun...and then gets sucked into the Cherubim as the two cores reconfigure, clacking together directly in front of it.

"Right," Uri says, "Hold on!"

The Mark 06 dives out of the way, still holding onto the double blade as the pillar of lightning slams into MP-1, slamming it into and through the ground of NERV-2 and into the base below. Turning, the Cherubim takes off in pursuit of the Mark 06 once more.

...

The two unholster their guns, Misato firing off three shots, Shepard ducking, rolling and bouncing into a leap, firing off a stream of rounds which Misato ducks, rolling behind the corner, slamming a clip back in.

"You're shooting to knock out," Misato says, "I'm using live ammo! Think about it, lady!"

"You're using clips, I'm *not,*" Shepard responds, "I can do this all day, Katsuragi! You're at a serious disadvantage!"

"You'd think that. MAGI, reconfigure 22-120!"

A set of pillars shoot up from the floor, a set of blast shields rising to

waist height from the floor as Misato dives back in, the walls extending outward as Shepard grunts and ducks behind a column.

She ducks out, swinging and firing, the semi-automatic systems in the pistol taking over and sending a spray of fire out, each one barely missing Misato as she darts from cover to cover, remarkably agile in thigh high heeled boots.

Aiming, getting a bead, she grabs the pistol in both hands...and with a flash of gunpowder the pistol explodes, the bullet lodged in the barrel.

"That was my favorite gun," Shepard growls.

Tossing away the ruined weapon, she charges as Misato leaps out from behind cover, firing a three round spread which crackles against Shepard's personal shields. With a snarl and curse, Misato ducks the first punch, which leaves a knuckle imprint against the metal column, flipping the pistol in her hand and slamming the butt against Shepard's stomach.

The pistol shatters with Shepard's grunt of pain, Misato ducking and diving between her legs, rolling to her feet and thrust kicking her opponent in the back. Shepard turns, lunging with a punch, Misato blocking, a return strike blocked with an open hand which closes around the wrist.

Misato lets go, a palm strike to Shepard's face making her let go of the other hand, jumping back and onto one of the raises metal covers before leaping off and into a kick to the face which makes her stagger back with a yell.

"Nice," Shepard says, wiping the blood from her lip, "Okay then. You can take a punch."

There is a whine which Misato realizes is the build up of hydraulics, and Shepard's punch sends her flying across the room.

...

The next room over, Legion fields its shields wearing away under the rifle fire, shifting between visual and invisible, ducking behind an overturned office desk. Its previous attempts to hack Kirishima's cybernetic systems failed. She was aware of his presence. A brute force solution is required.

To that extent, Mana squeaks as the round puts a hole the size of a volleyball through the wall behind her.

"*Postulation,"* Legion says, "*Not enough gun.*"

"Crap," Mana growls, ducking behind an overturned table, "What sniper rifle puts a hole that big? Could probably snipe Jet Alone with that thing..."

%(?

The black and white floating ball hovers in front of her. Grinning, Mana punches. Little folds inwards, forming into a black portal. A second portal appears right in front of Legion, out of which comes Mana's fist directly into its face.

The robot stumbles back, squeaking in a stuttering, high pitches speech as Mana leaps over the table, swinging her rifle into its head, before riding it to the floor and wailing on it with a scream.

"You! Do not! Get! In! My! *HEAD!"*

...

"*Well, that's actually not a bad idea. You want to spend more time working on the technical aspects of piloting?"*

Asuka nods, ducking under a low hanging pipe as she walks behind her in the underside of Cage 4, the one set aside for Jet Alone Prime.

"*A good idea,"* Tali says, "*Your mother does say you have skill as an Engineer."*

The two enter the lift elevator, floors speeding up. The mesh wall reveals Cage 2 and the dormant form of Evangelion Unit 02, the four green eyes glowing slightly as the Eva is semi-active, if not fully activated.

"Well, she h-has been more supportive," Asuka says, "It's just...I wonder if I c-could do more by working on the technology."

"*A good idea. You have technological knowledge and aptitude. From what I understand you saved your sister's life. I'll forward some technical manuals*

to your PDA. Maybe that will give you a good head start."

The doors open. No one comes through. Tali looks past Asuka, tilting her head as she taps her Omnitool once again, scanning the area...

And then Asuka's eyes roll up and she collapses, a blue liquid stain on the back of her neck.

The air distorts, Garrus lowering the pistol as Mordin scans the area with his omnitool, Tali's mouth hanging open as the turian walks towards her, waving her forward silently.

"Garrus? What are you doing here?"

"No time to explain," he says, "We found out how to get here and get you home. We need to-"

"*Are you INSANE?"*

Both pause. Mordin slowly, steadily raises his omnitool towards Unit 02.

"She doesn't look happy to see us," Garrus says.

"Mm. Fascinating. Resembles Go-kun. Power build up..."

"*You don't just go around shooting people! Especially here!"*

"It's a sedative, it won't hurt her, and we just need to-"

"MASTER!"

Four eyes flash on. Unit 02 lowers its head to stare at Garrus and Mordin.

"Oh, crap," Garrus mutters, "Mordin?"

"This reminds me of a line from a famous Earth movie done by a comedy troop from the British Isles."

"Which is?"

"RUN AWAY!"

...

Maya Ibuki looks up from the PDA she is holding just in time to listen to the screaming. Well, she only tangentially noticed it earlier. Ms. Makinami's proposal towards her regarding that family dinner is still ringing in her ears, but she does notice it when she sees the source of the screaming.

Down the corridor, at the T-section, she sees a lithe, thin alien with the fleshy horns run past, pumping his arms as fast as he can. Right behind him is a larger alien in bulky armor, holding onto a rifle like it was a lifeline.

Right behind them is the larger canine avatar for Unit 02, followed by close to a dozen Aibos.

Right behind all of that is Unit 02's hand.

"Well," she says, "They're f_ed."

...

Misato stumbles back to her feet, dodging a punch which goes halfway through the wall, knees Shepard in the gut and boxing her on the ears. Shepard responds in kind, headbutting Katsuragi with an audible clang, barely missing with a back fist which goes halfway through one of the support columns as Misato dives to the ground, pulling out a fold out baton from her jacket and slamming it into Shepard's knee.

The red haired woman grunts, grabbing Misato by the collar and lifting her up one handed, Misato kicking and flipping off and landing in a crouch.

Spinning, she hooks Shepard across the face, Shepard rolling with the kick and spinning into an elbow to Misato's gut. The two stumble back, wheezing, grinning and charging again.

Which is when a knife hand to the back of Misato's neck knocks her straight out. Shepard looks up, and for a moment locks eyes with Yui Ikari before the head of Project E slams her in the face with the baseball bat.

...

Locking the doors shut behind them, Garrus pills out the pistol and shoots the locks, fusing the metal together as he pulls Mordin back just before the knuckles easily the size of them indent the wall. They stumble back, towards the center of the larger, open room, both breathing heavily.

"Okay," Garrus breathes, "This plan isn't working."

"An understatement that is quite correct," Mordin says, stroking his chin, "Ah. Miscalculated, we have. Mm. Problem. Big problem. Red hair, blue eyes. We've brought down great wrath upon ourselves."

Garrus stares at him.

"I shot Asuka, didn't I?" he asks.

"Worse. The Asuka that the Rei we encountered considered her and I quote 'bestest best friend."

They look up. Eight equidistant ventilation covers line the domed ceiling. Mordin shrieks, backing away, his brown skin fading into white. Garrus pulls out his pistol and shoots each one, fusing them in place.

A pale white fist bursts through one, then another, red eyes glowing through each closed cover. Garrus picks up Mordin and slings him over his shoulder, running through the doors on the other side of the room as Unit 02's fist finally breaks through, feeling around the room as the girls begin to enter.

Bursting through the doors, Garrus runs, Mordin still screaming as Garrus shuts and locks every door behind them, running with impressive speed through the corridors, winding through as he engages his tactical cloak and runs until they read a pitch black room. Locking the door, he activates his omnitool.

Cameras sputter and die, a stream of junk data shot into the MAGI to mask their position.

"Okay," he says, "I think we lost them."

He and Mordin look out across the empty, massive room. Presumably, this is one of the launch bays. Large, green metal walls, rails leading to the surface, well lit...

Scratch that. Lights short out, plunging the room into darkness.

"*Heee~ey.*"

The voice is light, squeaky. The voice of a little girl.

"Mordin?"

"Terrified. Beyond capacity for rational thought."

"Suggestions?"

"Bend over. Kiss ass goodbye."

Two lights shine down on them, two yellow spotlights which they soon realize are not lights at all, but *eyes.* Glowing, yellow eyes belonging to the purple and green Evangelion now standing in front of them, as gears whir and metal begins to tear around its jaw.

With a final rip of the restraining bolts, the locks around Unit 01's jaw open and the Evanglion roars, the air humid and filled with Anger, Rage, and Hunger. And all the two can do as the hand descends upon them is scream as loud as they can-

---

...

The Mark 06 charges, slamming the double blade into the Cherubim, cleaving through the AT Field and taking one of the spinning cores off.

"Die!" Uri screams, "Die, already!"

"Those...aren't the cores," Kaworu mutters, still holding his head, "Wait...wait. Power source. Aim, for the power source."

The Mark 06 rises, shooting into the sky as the bleeding Cherubim shoots after him. Lightning arcs around it, striking the edges of the Evangelions AT Field.

"Throw it!" Kaworu yells, "Throw it at the Cherubim!"

Uri growls, willing the Eva to raise its arm. The blade folds in on itself, straightening out into a long, dual pronged lance, the prongs wrapping around themselves in a long, spiraled spearhead.

"The Lance on Longinius?" Uri asks, and pushes the thought down. With a yell, he sends the command and the Eva hurls it, the spear crashing through the Cherubim's shield and drilling straight through

it. The Cherubim pauses, as if in disbelief, before the twin gouts of LCL burst from either side and it explodes.

...

And in NERV-2, Lorenz Kihl allows a small, knowing smile to cross his face.

Exactly as planned.

...

"*Are you all IDIOTS? What was going through your mind when you planned this OUT?"*

Shepard is sporting a black eye which is quickly healing, Kasumi is tapping her foot, and Mordin and Garrus are both pale.

Legion is holding his own head underneath his arm, two more prominent holes in his chest next to the main hole, and Grunt is, well...

Grunt is smiling wider than they've ever seen before.

"I'm an adult!" he says, again.

"Note to self," Mordin says, tapping his omnitool, "Explain Krogan reproductive functions thoroughly to Grunt. Has wrong definition of 'penetration.'"

Yui is still padding the baseball bat. Asuka is rubbing the back of her neck, standing with Mana's help, watching as Tali paces back and forth in front of her crew members and yelling at them the entire time.

"*You come in here, guns blazing, and you shoot my APPRENTICE the moment you see her! Who planned this?"*

"Yeah, we could've done this better," Shepard mutters, folding her arms.

"I've reached full maturity!"

Tali pauses, staring at Grunt.

"*What did the girls do to him?"*

Standing next to Yui, Rei splits her face in an ear to ear grin. Yui blanches, stepping aside.

"He got the Nagisa special," Misato mutters, craning her neck.

"*I don't want to know,"* Tali sighs, throwing up her arms, "*Fine. I appreciate that you went through this trouble to find me, Shepard. But...how did you get here in the first place?"*

VWORP.

A pale blue light, first, above the space between Tali's crew and the NERV personnel, fading into an outline of something large and boxy.

VWORP.

The outline fills in. Something blue, the letters POLICE on the top.

VWORP.

The shape fills in completely. The blue police box rattles with the sound of old machinery for a moment.

Then the doors open, and a man with wild brown hair peaks out before snapping off his glasses.

"Right," he says in a clipped british accent, "There you are. Good work, Shepard. Wanted everyone in the same room and you did it wonderfully."

"Doctor," Shepard says, pursing her lips, "Are you telling me this idiot plan to get into a firefight with NERV was so you could get an audience?"

"Yes, just about," The Doctor says, stepping out of the box and walking to Rei, "Right. Rei."

Rei sighs, reaching into her plug suit and pulling out a long, thin rod with a glowing light on the end, slapping it into the Doctor's outstretched hand.

"It was really fun," Rei says with a smile.

"I know. But it has sentimental value."

Shepard palms her face, groaning loudly.

"You punted us across the *Universe,* to get your *screwdriver* back," she asks.

"Sort of," the Doctor says, carefully examining it, looking down across it as the end glows and the vent covers open and close, "Whoopsie, sorry. Fixing that. Well, that and you kept punching me whenever I said how dangerous universal travel was."

She rolls her eyes. Kasumi takes a step back as Grunt giggles.

"*Right,"* Tali says, and pats Asuka on the shoulder, "*I should get going. Thank you for your hospitality. And not dissecting me."*

"Not every day we make First Contact," Yui responds, shaking Tali's hand, "Given how insane things get, I wouldn't be surprised if we ran into your people again."

Tali nods.

"*I uploaded the data, like we agreed,"* Tali says, "*Thank you, Dr. Ikari. The information I'll take home will be very useful. Good luck with your future endeavors."*

She turns to Asuka, smiling under her mask.

"*You as well, Miss Sohryu. Study those manuals. You'll make a fine engineer."*

The Doctor claps his hands with a smile.

"Well then," he shouts, "Off we go. *Allons-y* and all that!"

He turns to Shepard, smiling in his cheery, hyperactive childish sort of way.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah," Shepard says, "Um...one last thing, though."

"Yes?"

Shepard pitches forward and headbutts the Doctor, blood pouring from his nose as he screams and Shepard grabs him by the collar.

"Let's go!" Shepard yells, "Everyone in the damn TARDIS!"

Garrus and Mordin enter first, Legion pushing Grunt in as it fixes its head back onto its neck.

"Sorry about the inconvenience," Shepard sighs, rubbing the back of her neck, "Thanks for taking care of my crew member, Doctor Ikari."

"I understand you took care of Rei when she was in your dimension," Yui says with a smile, "I was returning the favor."

Shepard nods, a half-handed salute and a smile before she turns to Tali.

"C'mon, let's go home."

"*Right behind you, Shepard."*

The last of them enter the police box, the Doctor still yelling in pain as the doors close, and the light flashes as the box fades out of existence. The room hangs silent for a moment, as if they are trying to process the departure of one of their own.

"So, is it just me," Misato says, "Or was Ichi acting like *Rei?"*

Chapter 53: Fuster Cluck

Somewhere along the lines of the complete disaster that the night was, Yui progressed past the point of inarticulate rage and straight into pantomime. They are not sure exactly what the catalyst was. It may have been the dance battle in the middle of Tokyo-3 between Rei, Shinji, and a small army of Israfels lead by a red and silver 'Prime' Israfel to the tune of "Thriller".

It could have been when Dr. Sohryu got into what is being colloquially termed by Lieutenant Makoto as a 'Bitch Off' with Claire Makinami that ended, as such things are fated to, in fire.

It could have been when Sub Director Sohryu got into a fist fight with one of NERV's high level guests that took them across much of Tokyo-3 and, coincidentally into the restaurant that the Commander took Dr. Ikari to to keep her away from the potential insanity.

Or it could have been when Nana attempted to kidnap an deflower Shinji.

Or, realistically, it could have been all of those combined that has reduced Dr. Ikari to communicating through hand gestures and a sketchbook.

But that is simple semantics. As it is, Gendo Ikari has realized he is a dead man.

Chapter 53: Fuster Cluck

"Whore. You're a big, sweaty, easy whore."

Kaji Ryoji bristles slightly, staring at his ward as she taps the controller for her video game, muttering to herself as her character dies, messily.

"I resent that statement," he says, "It's not like I'm cheating on Misato, anyway."

"You still want to nail Akagi," Mana responds, "See if she has any heterosexual left in her. Go boldly where no man has gone before."

He grimaces, scratching the back of his head.

"Yeah," he says, "We did that in college. That's part of the reason Misato and I broke up."

"Nailing her best friend does that," Mana responds, "Half the reason I don't date, Kaji. People are way too complicated for my taste."

"Hence why you like the simple, stoic types, like Mr. Sohryu."

"Who also likes the blonde, aryan types and at what point did we talk about my complete lack of love life?"

He sighs, nodding. Some subjects with her are harder to broach than others. She's been...well, depressed since the Leliel attack, possibly because of the attachment she formed with the Shinji from the other universe.

"C'mon, kid," he says, slumping onto the couch next to her, "It's not that bad. My love life's about as bad as yours, except all the opposite genders in my love life either hate me or want to seriously hurt me. Abstinence has its virtues, you know."

...

"So, about boys."

Shinji had come to believe that whatever traits he inherits from his father make him completely and utterly submissive to the women of the Ikari family. Hence, why he has somehow agreed to do this. He is going to give the Talk. To Kei.

"Boys," she responds, sitting across the living room from him, sitting on the second couch as the seconds tick by. Mom's exile from NERV is over, Asuka is back at Misato's apartment. And he is alone with Kei.

This is such a *good* idea.

...

The door slams open, and Pieter Sohryu steps out of the way as Yui Ikari stomps past, heading to the lift elevator. Tossing caution to the wind, he walks after her, stopping the closing doors with his hand between them and stepping in. She is clutching a folder in her hand, and he bends forward, glancing at the title and letting his eyes go

wide with a start as the pieces come together.

"That's not good," he says, "What's your idea?"

"You're not involved, Pieter," she responds.

"Doctor Ik...Yui, you're planning to challenge the Marduk Report. As Sub Director of NERV, it is my job. What's your idea?"

"I'm talking to the chair of the Marduk Report. The real chair...fine. You'll be the administrative face. Agree with everything I say."

He nods.

"I go by the impression that was in my contract. 'Agree with everything Dr. Ikari says.'"

She nods with a smirk, walking out of the elevator as it hits the floor, Pieter behind her as he follows her into the domed room lined with a gold, copper grid. A snap of her fingers, and the lights shut out, the darkness split by a light shining overhead on Pieter and Yui, a single black Monolith appearing with the numbers 06 engraved on it.

"No," Yui says, "Not like this. No hiding behind the disguise."

The monolith fades. Sitting in a leather, scooped out bucket chair, a man appears. He has white hair and a white goatee, thought black, very impressive eyebrows, his face angular, sharp, everything about him suggesting severity, intelligence, and a dangerous, almost predatory charm. His face is expressionless, his suit black and white, lacking a tie and the white labcoat draped over the back.

"Yui," he says, the lollipop in his mouth only faintly muffling the crisp accent, "As much as you dislike protocol, they are set up for a reason. I do question why you brought Sub Director Sohryu into the meeting."

"Doctor Ikari represents Project E," Pieter says, "I'm Administrative."

"Of course. Overlooking the fact that you have no idea what this meeting is about, Sohryu, or the fact that everyone in this room knows that my daughter runs NERV in totality with the actual administrators having at most perfunctory roles in signing off on projects."

Pieter blinks. He's sure he understood some of what this man, an obvious member of the SEELE council is says, and as for his daughter...

"Your...daughter?" he asks, glancing between Yui and the man, "What do you...oh. Oh, *Hell.*"

"Pieter, this is Katsuhito Ikari," Yui explains, "Professor of theoretical physics at Oxford University, Chairman of the Marduk Committee, member of the Committee of Human Instrumentality under the alias of Science, and my father."

"Chair of Theoretical Physics. And SEELE 06," Katsuhito adds, "While we're dismissing all of my aliases, we might as well be thorough. I agreed to this meeting, Yui, and we are both busy. What is your concern?"

Yui opens the folder, the decidingly familiar image of the girl on the front page.

"When were you going to tell me that *Kei* has been selected as the Sixth Child?"

...

"You want. Me. And Asuka. To have dinner with your ex wife."

Pieter rolls around his tongue, choosing his words carefully. He has to, he realizes. The wrong words could end up getting him, say, castrated.

"Yes," he responds.

Kyoko purses her lips. Wrong words.

"...please?" he continues. Her expression doesn't change, remaining gravel in front of him, standing with him in the hallway outside of her office because he wanted witnesses in case she tried to kill him.

"Excuse me!"

Both turn and step out of the way of a middle aged woman with graying, strawberry blonde hair, who steps past them and continues on.

"Huh," Pieter mutters, leaning in to watch her go, "She's heading to Ikari's office."

They walk after her, the conversation shelved for a moment. He will have his work cut out for him to convince her to go along with his

idea, that much he is certain about. On the other hand, this does look intriguing.

"Did you know her?" Kyoko asks.

"No."

"Then why were you staring at her?"

He shrugs. She mutters something in German.

"Remind me again why I sleep with you."

"I'm the better alternative," he responds, as they approach the now open door to Yui's office.

"You promised me you'd keep her out of this, Yui! I want her home! I want her home RIGHT NOW!"

The two stop. The woman is braced on Yui's desk. They can't see her face, just Yui's, and there's a look of consternation on it as she rubs the bridge of her nose, weathering the verbal barrage.

"Alicia," Yui says, hands up defensively, voice pure, soothing calm, "I did not plan for an Angel to attack Berlin."

"That was the only reason I even let her get sucked into this! She'd be just as safe with me and her father! At least she can get to a shelter here and not ride shotgun on one of your giant robots!"

Rubbing her temples, Yui sighs, massaging her forehead as Pieter knocks on the door. The woman turns, spinning on her heel. Grabbing the box of tissues from Yui's desk, she dabs on her eyes, muttering something under her breath.

"How long were you listening?" Yui asks.

"Just got here," Pieter responds, "Anything I can do?"

"Charter a flight to Berlin," the woman growls.

"No," Yui says, and turns to the woman, "No. She'll be fine. As long as there's no more Angel attacks in Germany, as soon as we figure out-"

"You think I'm overreacting?" the woman snaps, "Yui, Tomoe's going *insane* from this! I had to talk him down from marching down here and punching Gendo in the face!"

Pieter and Kyoko exchange a glance, and turn back to the arguing women.

"I'm missing something, here," Kyoko says, "We haven't been properly introduced."

"Right, right," Yui sighs, "Alicia, this is Pieter Sohryu and Doctor Kyoko Sohryu. I'd like you to meet Alicia, my sister-in-law. It seems that there was a problem with her daughter that I may be responsible for."

"Understatement of the year, Yui," Alicia scowls, "My daughter ended up in one of your giant robots when an alien attacked Berlin!"

Which is exactly when Kyoko's eyes snap wide open and she realizes where she has seen Alicia's vaguely recognizable features before. The same hair, same face, although the fact that this woman isn't bowing and being polite threw her off for a moment.

"Guter Gott," she mutters, "Annette?"

Alicia snaps her gaze to Kyoko. Pieter raises an eyebrow.

"Yes," Alicia says, "You've met my daughter?"

"Your daughter," Kyoko says, and turns to Yui, "And your *niece?"*

...

"Right. So, here's the plan. Your mother, and I are going to dinner tonight. Your cousin has had an...incident...and we're running damage control so your Uncle doesn't pitch a fit. To that extent, we'll be meeting them afterwards. Asuka's parents, Mari, and Mrs. Makinami are going out as well. Shinji; you, Asuka, Rei, and Kei will be damage control for that. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Yeeee~ep."

"Understood."

Gendo Ikari nods. Silently, he feels the tension leaving his shoulders.

This could go bad. This should go bad. But he is hardly a pessimist these days, and prefers to wade straight into disasters with gusto.

Delegate and pray. That is more or less his management style these days.

"Right," he says, snapping out his watch, "Calibrate watches. Report in every thirty minutes. With luck, we won't need an Eva deployment."

...

MAGI surveillance systems are online. Would you like to play a game?

"Very funny, girls. Give us a full sweep of Target. Section, 2, report."

"*This is Birdhouse. We are watching the Park Bench. Old Man and Popcorn are at the Bench."*

The Big Screen flashes. The MAGI connection comes to life, real time footage of the Tokyo-3 Bistro. On the screen, they watch the five arrive at the table. Mari has been convinced to dress conservatively. White blouse, black skirt, school uniform jacket. Does remind them that if they can get an extension of her being out of MAGI, she's going back to school in two days.

Pieter is in a gray suit. Kyoko has a black dress and jacket. Makinami is wearing white, which is a point of irony for those who know her, and Maya has a NERV dress uniform on, mainly because the sensors built into it give the cameras something to home in on.

"Dogma systems are go," Makoto says, at his post, "Tokyo-3 Bistro under full surveillance, Ma'am."

"Lilly is sighted in Mari's purse."

"Rei is in the ductwork."

Reaching into her bomber jacket, Misato withdraws the cigar and chomps off the bit.

"Let's get this show on the road."

...

For the life of him, he can't understand why Maya is with Mrs. Makinami. Maya has always seemed like a nice, level headed girl. Sure, she's one of the people in charge of Project E, works with his parents and works for NERV, but at the same time she's always been kind, smiling, and just...nice to everyone.

How'd this happen?

"I'm r-really not sure this was the best idea. We're not really recovered yet, are we?"

She's right, Shinji thinks. There's still the small bit of swelling on her neck and on his. Sure, the treatments Mom has them both on cut the disease from months to a few days, but they both could use a nap.

Still, she's dressed up. The same dress from the school dance, her hair done in that three part wave with her barrettes on the top of her head. And the NERV expense card paying for everything, in theory so they could keep an eye on her family.

But in truth, so they could go out on a date.

"So," Asuka says, "What h-happened to your cousin?"

"I don't know," he sighs, shrugging, "Honestly, I haven't seen her in ten years. After Mom and Father sent me to live with my aunt and uncle, they sent her away. She moved to another country to live with I guess some family friends. No one's told me why."

"Mm. What was she like?"

He pauses, for a moment. Pursing his lips, her brings the memories to focus.

"She was a real jerk."

Scratching his head, sighing, he looks at her with a shrug.

"Really. I mean, I'd say one thing wrong and *wham,* I'm on the floor and she's sitting on my head."

...

The Makinami Estate, outside of Berlin.

Uri peaks his head into the bedroom. It isn't technically hers, but after much convincing and especially some prodding from Kaworu, they convinced Annette to move into Mrs. Makinami's bedroom. Which, judging from the size, should be about the same area as Central Dogma.

The ceiling is about fifteen feet high, forming into a dome with a replica painting of the Creation of Man at the zenith. The bed is four posts, five mattresses, several sheets filled with down, wool, and the feathers of cloned extinct birds.

The computer console he finds her at has six screens in a honeycomb configuration, the CPU several floors below in a water tank.

Much of what he knows about Claire Makinami tells him the justification of all this is 'Because I can.'

"Hi, Uri," Annette says, spinning the leather computer chair on its axel, changed from her maid uniform to a set of pink, bunny printed pajamas, "I was just sending an email to my cousin."

"Cousin?" he asks, "Odd. I didn't know you had a cousin."

He walks over to the bed, sitting on it. He sinks two inches, raising an eyebrow.

"I haven't seen him in ten years," she responds with a sigh, "At least he's better than when he was six. He was kind of a hopeless dork, then."

...

"I mean it! I'd say one thing wrong and she'd pound me! I swear, Annette was insane!"

"Isn't Uri's girlfriend named Annette?" Asuka asks, head tilting in confusion.

He shrugs, handing the menus to the waiter.

"Yeah," he responds, "No way that's her, though. I wouldn't wish Annette on anyone, especially Uri."

"She was that bad?"

"Asuka, the only reason she didn't take my lunch money was because we weren't in school."

A shuffle. Someone sits in one of the corner booths. Shinji stares, Asuka turning and seeing the newly arrived couple.

"Is that Dr. Akagi?"

"And Mr. Kaji?"

In truth, the surprise was not seeing them, but the possibility of seeing them. After all, neither knew Mr. Kaji past him being Misato's 'Special Friend', which itself scared them as they were using Rei terms, and the words 'Ritsuko Akagi' and 'Social Life' were not used in the same sentence by many at NERV.

...

"I'm still surprised Misato agreed to this."

Kaji shrugs, every present smirk on his face. He has a black suit that has seen better days, she the closest thing she has to a formal black dress that would still be considered conservative by most priests.

"Misato's still convinced I'm going to cheat on her," he responds, "I guess she wanted to take the initiative, this time."

"Awfully defeatist of you, Kaji."

"That's the way it is," he responds with a sigh, "I think we don't want to have a happy ending. There's too much in our past to allow it. What she's done against the Angels, and myself..."

Ritsuko nods. She sips her wine, adjusting her glasses as she gazes on her old friend.

"I honestly never thought of you as a father figure, Kaji."

"That depends on whether you find it attractive."

"No joke. I mean with Mana. She knows, doesn't she?"

He nods, sipping his wine, wishing it was beer.

"That I threw the grenade back in my old anti establishment days?

Yep. She figured it out about when I was appointed her handler. She's a smart kid."

...

"And here we are. I must say, you're a bigger woman than I, Dr. Sohryu, for agreeing to this. You must really be supportive of my husband to agree to this."

Kyoko smiles. It is a forced, terrible thing, as she folds her unmanicured hands on the table across from Claire.

"Ex-husband," Kyoko corrects, "When you left him for your hairdresser, you did send him the divorce papers."

Pieter groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. He really should have seen this coming, but on the other hand he did marry both women, so perhaps his judgement of their character is slightly blinded.

"Really nice restaurant, Dad," Mari chimes in.

"Thanks," Pieter groans, shuffling slightly as Kyoko pulls her chair, sitting directly across the table from Claire, "Kyoko. Please, for the *love of God..."*

"I can tell you don't like me," Claire says.

"You're smart. I can tell," Kyoko says, and sighs, tapping her lip, "A stupid person does not involve themselves with the Old Men and live this long."

"I'm just here for my daughter."

"You're horrible at lying," Kyoko responds, "Which is odd, to. It makes my respect of you go down a bit. Then again, going down is probably one of your greater strengths."

...

In Central Dogma, the control nexus of NERV erupts with a mighty cry of "Oh, SHIT!"

"Did I just see that?" Misato asks.

"Hot damn!" Makoto yells, "We got ourselves a BITCH OFF!"

...

"Still, I have to respect you," Claire responds, raising a carefully crafted eyebrow, folding her hands in a bridge under her chin, "The second to Dr. Ikari. All that hard word, those degrees and awards to climb you way up to just underneath Yui Ikari. That has to be an accomplishment for you."

"Not to mention I have two children who kill Angels," Kyoko responds, not noticing Pieter shrinking into his seat, "Admittedly, I could have done a much better job raising them. But on the other hand, I had to raise them alone."

"Ah, yes. Your son."

"And my daughter, the smartest girl in this restaurant," Kyoko responds, sipping her wine, "Who, after my wrath misdirected at her for sixteen years has found it in her heart to forgive me. That automatically makes her a better person than I."

"That's not hard, in this day and age," Claire sighs, holding out her glass as a waiter dutifully walks over and refills it, "After all, what have we done to get by? Surely, none of us are innocent."

"And most of us have not given lap dances to Chairman Kihl."

...

Deep in the Earth, deep in the Geofront, long green fingers stroke along the spine of a book before digging into it and sucking out the words through ink stained feelers. Ah, he thinks, a good read.

"*Hi, Wuffles!*"

Junior, first and only of the Sandolim, shudders. Something within him vibrates to the tone of mating cicadas. The speakers were an afterthought, and a constant remind of what could find him if he physically wandered out of Sheol.

Greetings, children. To what do I owe this visit?

Holographic projectors flicker to life. Five giant Rei Ayanami heads appear, one of them with a head band and for some reason one of them with cat ears.

"*Weeee~ell, we found a lot of little Israfels out in the city! So, we wanted to give you a chance to deal with them!*"

Children, if I leave Sheol I will be attacked by NERV. How do you propose that?

The circle on the center of the floor opens. Junior shudders, his eyes taking a diagonal configuration connected to sheer, bladder squeezing horror. This means, of course, that the girls can get to him if they want to. He does not like the implications of such information.

"*Don't worry, Wuffles! We made an avatar body for you!*"

The capsule rises, opening. Junior stares at it, mouth tendrils twitching for long moments as it takes in the masterwork of the Rei.

If I had tear ducts, I would cry in joy.

...

Maya shifts in her seat, pulling her seat over slightly to sit next to Mari.

"I think we're being ignored," Maya sighs.

"Tell me about it," Mari says with a shrug, "I figured Mom would be happy I was alive but *noooo.*"

The glasses wearing girl sighs, dramatically, waving her hands in frustration as the veiled insults continue flying between the two former wives of Sub Director Sohryu.

Half of her wants to watch the sparks fly. Half of her wants to calm them both down and just, for once, have the illusion of a normal family, which is a moot point because her *sister* wasn't invited.

"Well, look at the time," Kyoko says, tapping her watch, "Got to go."

Pushing the chair out from the table, Kyoko rises with a whistle,

picking up her bag and slinging it over her shoulder.

"If you'll excuse me," she says, adjusting her glasses, "Pieter, please try not to impregnate her again while I am gone."

Pieter stares at her, his eyes darting between his two former wives. Exchanging a glance with Claire, he shrugs as, without another word Kyoko exits the restaurant. Mari runs out after her, leaving him with the other two women.

"I have no idea what that was," he sighs, draining his wine glass.

...

"Twice in one week. Either Sohryu is better and keeping things under control at NERV than Kozou ever was, or you're trying to hide something from me."

Sipping his wine, Gendo smiles, his wife sitting across from him at the restaurant table. He always chooses the best. This restaurant is a five star accommodation. The breadsticks cost 500 yen each.

Their usual table was not available. He may have to have the city council member visited by one of the girls to better explain how things work. But that would be petty.

Instead, he will...

Will...

F_.

There is someone in a diving suit walking across the apartment building roof across from the restaurant. The seals are leaking yellow, the helmet filled with a yellow liquid. The backpack slung over the shoulder, he can see, is filled with plastique explosives.

Unfortunately, the problem is that Yui read the reports from last time. She recognizes the look, and turns to the window. Tapping on his PDA, the bracelet he gave her for their anniversary gets to work. Small needles prick her, and in mid turn her expression goes glassy eyed, and she collapses to the floor with a giggle.

...

"So, I'm impressed. That's was actually pretty classy for you to do that, Dr. Sohryu."

Turning slightly, Kyoko is not surprised to find Mari following her. Snorting, she slows her pace and lets Mari catch up, walking beside her.

"About?"

"Walking away," Mari responds, "Not letting my Mom suck you into a fight."

Kyoko smiles. It is not the same horrifying sight her smile normally is, but there is a glint in her eyes as she does so that peaks Mari's curiosity. Often, Mari Makinami wonders what not only attracted her father to this woman, but roped him back in once again.

"It saddens me, Makinami, to realize you inherit your father's judge of character."

Mari stares back, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry?"

"I didn't leave the dinner to be a 'bigger woman,' which is untrue as your mother has at least five kilograms on me, ass wise. In all honesty, that little exchange was a distraction, nothing more. I left because I have something more important to do."

It is soon enough that Mari realizes they were heading in the direction of the school. In particular, the gymnasium. Taking out a key, Kyoko undoes the lock, walking in. A set of speakers and a disc player are set up in the far corner of the otherwise empty gym, lights flickering on as they enter.

"What is this?" Mari asks.

"Me attempting to make up for a mistake," Kyoko responds, "Any good scientist goes back and analyzes past mistakes. Realizes how things should have gone better if given the chance to repeat. But people are not like experiments. Very rarely do you have the chance to repeat interactions."

The doors open again. Glancing around at the gym, Shinji and Asuka enter. Kyoko clears her throat. For a moment, just a brief, brief

moment, Mari could swear that the elder Sohryu is nervous.

"I didn't have time to decorate," Kyoko says, "But I thought we could try this again."

...

"We just keep getting locked in a cycle," Ritsuko sighs, her salad half forgotten in front of her, "Misato has her issues, you have yours. And you're never going to find any happiness as long as the two of you keep dancing around your feelings."

"We're pretty clear about our feelings," Kaji sighs, fork embedded in the steak, "Misato told me to cheat on her, for God's sakes."

"That isn't feelings, Kaji. That's *defeatism.* Neither of you want to accept that you actually have a future or actual damn feelings, so you set up this series of gambits and games that end up with you apart."

"Takes one to know one, Ritz."

"And what the Hell does that mean?" she demands, stabbing her knife into the salad bowl, "I don't even have a God damn love live to ruin in the first place!"

"And isn't that *fantastic.*"

He chuckles, pinching the bridge of his nose as she stares at him, incensed.

"It's in front of you and you don't see it," he sighs, "You know what the secret is, Ritz? You know how I'm going to win Katsuragi's heart?"

"Enlighten me."

"I'm going to show up at Central Dogma in a chicken suit."

He says it with dignity, with distinction. It is the paradoxical nature of the ridiculous plan and the confidence behind it that makes her brain skip, for a moment, like a pebble across a pond.

"But...why?"

"Because it's spontaneous," Kaji responds, "It's unexpected. And Ritz, in all honesty, if you ever want to find happiness, you have to try

something you would never try under any circumstances."

...

"I have figured out, to an extent, that the worst thing I have done to you...outside of everything else...is how I completely and utterly ruined your school dance. I can't just say I'm sorry for what I've done. All that is empty unless I try to make up for it."

Sighing, Kyoko takes off her glasses, filing them in her purse and staring at Asuka. The girl shakes her head, smiling, squeezing Shinji's hand before walking over to Kyoko and hugging her.

"You d-didn't have to do this," she says.

"I did. And besides which, Pieter wanted the entire family together," Kyoko responds, "And more than him, you *are* my family."

A slow, steady clapping. Sighing, running her hand through her hair, Claire Makinami walks into the gymnasium. Glancing at the bare wells and sighing, she clears the distance between herself and Kyoko, arms folded as she taps her foot.

"That was rude, running out," she says, "Especially for *this*."

"Believe it or not, as second in command of Project E I have more important things than proving my ability to carry my weight in an insult fight."

"History says otherwise," Claire says, raising an eyebrow as the doors open again and Pieter skids in, "Really, Sohryu. You spend sixteen years as the poster child for mandatory sterilization and now you spend your time as the touchy feely mother figure?"

"Even if I belittled her, at least I did not outright ignore my daughter," Kyoko responds, "Congratulations, Makinami. You may actually be a worse parent than I."

"Oh, for God's sake," Mari sighs, snatching off her glasses and rubbing the bridge of her nose, "Dr. Sohryu, Mom, will you please-"

"That *thing*," Claire snaps, finger held at Mari, "Is *not* my daughter."

Pieter chokes. The room goes silent. Mari's glasses drop to the floor.

"You honestly think the Chairman didn't tell me?" Claire asks, "I know all about it. I know how the Angel you completely and utterly failed to kill wormed its way into my daughter's head and ate her. And now you parade around an Angel wearing her skin."

Heals clap against the floor. Mari runs out, and after a moment Shinji and Asuka follow suit. Pieter, on the other hand, simply continues staring at his second ex wife. He simply continues staring as Kyoko purses her lips, folding her arms as Claire clenches and unclenches her fists, coming down from her outburst.

"Well, you're in trouble now," Kyoko says, "I am reasonably sure that by calling Makinami a monster to her face you have pissed off several people who like her. Including one who has a tendency of using air ducts."

"Don't patronize me," Claire growls, her voice a low, dangerous whisper, "I've read the reports. You're a perfectionist, self-fulfilling prophecy. Megalomania, arrogance, god complex and transferring your own inadequacies towards that stuttering walking carpet you call a child. How unpleasant do you have to be when your husband won't come back to you when he realizes you had his child, hm?"

Kyoko narrows her eyes. She leans in, inches away from Claire.

"You did *not* just insult my daughter."

"Oh, of course. That's your job," Claire responds, a smirk crossing her face, "No wonder your children are so screwed up."

Kyoko smiles. It is a forced, horrible thing.

"It is fate, you know," Kyoko says, "We do things that serve us later. Only now do I have an answer to my question?"

"Which is?"

Which is when Clair notices the slender, metal rod with the trigger on the handle.

"If I don't smoke, why did I keep a barbeque lighter with me?"

And with that, Kyoko sets Claire's hair on fire.

...

"Crap. We lost her."

Wheezing, Shinji paces the empty field near the school, Asuka's hands clenching and unclenching as he takes out his cell phone, dialing up the number.

"Misato! Mari just ran off...yeah, her mother went off on her. We left her with Dr. Sohryu and the Sub Director-"

A blast of light knocks the cell phone out of his hand.

The first rises through the ground. It is red, with silver highlights, the three hole face rotating before it plants its feet on the ground and raises an accusing finger towards Shinji and Asuka.

More emerge. Dozens. Maybe over a hundred, each shades of blue and green with silver, each identical; a foot tall, heads mounts on the shoulders, three fingers and three toes each.

"I thought they were gone," Shinji whispers.

The Israfels stand straight, the lead one lowering its arm. One sets down a purloined boombox, tapping the play button.

'Thriller' begins playing. Asuka tilts her head. Shinji turns pale. The Israfels begin dancing, shuffling forward in a strange, almost comical gate.

"Um..."

"Asuka, we need to run."

"It's...dancing-"

"It's a song about zombies eating people! RUN!"

He grabs her wrist, running and dragging her with him. The Israfels run in pursuit.

...

Mari came to a stop half a mile away from the commotion, finally slumping on a tree stump near the Tokyo-3 city limits. Face help in her hands, her shoulders shake. This must be what her sister felt like, she thinks Rejected by her own mother.

"She does have a point. You are no longer human."

She turns. Rei walks to her...no, not Rei.

"Kei?"

"You are not human," Kei explains, "And therefor not bound by human laws. You realize that, do you not? That you are not simply what you were before Ramiel?"

She smiles. A small, knowing smile.

"What are you getting at?" Mari asks.

"A curiosity," Kei responds, "I wanted to...question...you. About how human you really think you are."

...

They quickly ran out of field, ran out of road. This part of Tokyo-3 is still more or less empty, and soon they found themselves in a parking lot, the only exit blocked by the advancing Israfels.

"Shit," Shinji growls, "*REI!*"

No answer. The Israfels advance, shuffling towards them, as Shinji places himself between them and Asuka.

The Israfels pause. Maybe because of the heroic gesture. Maybe from something else. More than likely, it is from the rumbling beneath the ground, as the cement underneath them begins to show hairline fractures.

The ground underneath the Israfels explodes upwards, tossing several of them through the air as something emerges. Gunmetal gray skin replacing the scales, its two eyes locked in a vertical configuration. The arms end with three long, serrated blades, the body held aloft by two vents spewing thrust right above the long, finned tail.

Shinji's jaw drops. Asuka tilts her head.

"Junior?" she asks.

"**Wuffletron 9000 online,**" Junior's voice booms through the head mounted speakers, electricity sparking between the mouth tendrils,

"**Pilots, the Ree have constructed this remote operated combat body. Please find cover while I deal with the Israfels.**"

The arms distend, a specialized connection to the Dirac Armory forming into two massive chainguns, as four tentacles burst out of the back, each holding a miniature copy of the Triple Heavy Maser.

"**Suck it down.**"

Chapter 54: Muffles

"You are unsure if you are human. You are, more or less, a soul inside a core, animating a body which has been on one occasion pronounced dead. By many assessments, you are a monster, and could be accurately classified as the Angel Ramiel."

Kei blinks. This is harder than she thought. Her purpose was clear when she arrived, and yet. And yet.

"I think we are similar."

Mari dabs her eye with her sleeve, staring at Kei.

"How so?" she asks.

Kei hesitates. Her orders were clear. The Chairman, guiding her, told her everything she had to say. But just like the landing pad, where she was going to verbally eviscerate everyone, she finds cruelty is so much harder than it seems.

"I think, Ms. Makinami, that I, too, am a monster."

Mari pats the seat next to her. Obediently, Kei sits down, folding her hands in her lap.

"Kei, you're Rei's sister," Mari says, her voice hoarse already, "Why do you think you're a monster?"

"I am not human. I never will be."

"So?"

Kei looks down. Her face shifts, her lips twitching downward.

"It...I don't know why. I guess, if I were human, I would be more like Li...like Mother."

Mari sighs, wrapping an arm around Kei's shoulder.

"Thanks."

"For?"

"For giving me a bit of perspective," Mari responds, "I guess, worse

comes to worse, I'm pretty much like you and Rei. Angel in a human body."

Kei nods. Her eyes shift, her gaze going to the ground.

This doesn't make sense, she thinks. She should be going on a rampage, now. The words were carefully chosen to provoke Mari, to send her into a fit. But they didn't work.

None of this works.

"So, what's on your mind?" Mari asks.

Kei grimaces. This is definitely not going according to plan.

"Stuff."

"Yep," Mari says with a grin, "You're Rei's sister, all right."

Chapter 54: Muffles

The first blast sends nearly a dozen of the Israfels flying. Which is, in and of itself, somewhat puzzling to Junior, as he realized that four Triple Heavy Masers should have been enough to punch a hole all the way to Lilith. But, then again, he also knows who designed this suit, which sort of is an argument of flash over substance.

"**This is for...law of Drama, is it not?**"

"*Yup!*"

The girl in the full diving suit and helmet, who no one saw arrive through the vent cover near Shinji and Asuka, pumps her fist into the air.

"Nana?" Shinji asks.

Asuka leans over.

"How can you tell them apart?"

"I'm their brother."

The girl rips off her helmet, in all ways identical to Rei, including the

crazed smile on her face. Producing the remote from inside the suit, she holds it up and presses the big, red button. All around the parking lot, the cars, which Shinji has now noticed do not have license plates, begin to glow from the charges stuffed into their interiors.

"Wow," Asuka says, somewhere between impressed and terrified, "This is really elaborate."

Nana cackles, throwing up her AT Field between Asuka, Shinji, herself, and several hundred pounds of military grade demolitions.

"*Boom for the Boom God!"*

...

Tomoe Ikari is a dignified man with a slightly girly appearance. Much like their son, Gendo Ikari has concluded that his brother-in-law would be an insanely hot woman if the gender was different, although it makes him not a very imposing man. Still, the black hair, intelligent eyes, and the mismatched colors of his khakis and sports jacket only helped the cover story that Tomoe had no idea what he was doing with his money when they sent the girl to live with the Makinamis.

Although that's less of a concern than the fact that Yui is *tripping balls.*

"Oh...wooooooooo~ooow, did you notice how *awesome* the colors of the table cloth are, rightamiright or what?"

She throws back her head, cackling madly before leaning to the side in her chair and sending it, the table cloth, and herself to the floor. Gendo folds his hands in front of his face, watching as Tomoe stares at his giggling, cackling sister and Alicia continues picking at her salad.

"So," Tomoe says, setting his plate down on the now bare table, "Why exactly did you..."

"One of the girls is loose," Gendo responds, "She was about to see."

"Ah, yes. Flargen fit?"

"Flargen fit. I understand you're upset."

The fist hits the table. Baring some teeth, the corner of his lip slightly

unturned, Alicia continues ignoring the two as she picks at her salad and Yui runs off to one of the air vents.

"Damn straight I'm upset," Tomoe responds, "The only reason we agreed with your plan was so Annette would be safe! Now she's riding around one of your giant robots getting chased by a damn Angel! How is this safer?"

"Tomoe, I'm not pleased with this either," Gendo says, hands still folded, glancing out of the corner of his eye as Yui, and the vent cover she liberated, fall from the ceiling and onto and through an empty table, thanking providence he remembered to rent out the whole room, "If the Angels are attacking world wide, my job just got a lot harder. Annette *was* safe. She *is* safe, now. An Evangelion is the safest place to be when an Angel attacks. We all know that."

They go silent, save for Yui as she bangs around the overhead duct work, swearing that Rei makes this look so damn easy and dammit now she's stuck. A waiter walks over with a ladder and a electric screw driver, unbolting the vent cover and spraying in the WD-40.

"Annette has a boyfriend?" Tomoe asks.

"Yes."

"Sohryu's son."

Gendo nods.

"Indeed. I am beginning to suspect that it is not coincidence, especially considering Shinji and Asuka's relationship. In any case, we will be leaving stateside in a week for a meeting. Annette and Uri will meet us there. If you wish, we can convince her to return to Tokyo-3 with us."

...

"So. Boys."

"Boys."

"Boys," Mari sighs, ruffling Kei's hair, "Yeah, that's a...tricky subject. How'd Shinji explain it?"

"Stammering. Freezing up. Saying he, and I quote, 'Had not a God

damn clue.' I expected him to be an expert on the field, since he has Y chromosomes."

"You'd be surprised how little boys know about themselves," Mari sighs, reaching into the purse up to her shoulder and pulling out two bottles of water, "So, boys. Lemme guess...is it...Nagisa?"

Kei stares at Mari. Sighing, she nods, taking the offered bottle.

"Got me my surprise," Mari says with a shrug, "I met him a couple of times with Mom and Dad. I thought he was gay."

Kei glares at her.

"Not a surprise to anyone who's seen the two of you, though," Mari explains, popping the top of the bottle and sipping, "Y'know, you're honestly adorable together."

Kei sighs, more dramatically this time.

"I am not trying to be...adorable."

"You're succeeding accidentally, then. It's his problem that he's trying to nail your sister. You know, I honestly never thought I'd have the same taste as you."

Kei stares at her. She raises one eye brow carefully, her tousled blue hair seeming to shift with her confusion.

"I like Uri, you like Nagisa," she says, "And they're brothers. Half brothers, from what 'Ska told me. Should've known they were related, though. Both of'em don't have a clue about women."

"I have met the Chairman. You have met Uriel's mother. This goes without saying."

"Yeah, and from what I read in Shinji's pilot logs, ADAM's a whiny emo bitch."

"Then socially, they are, if I have the expression right, cluster f_ed."

"And we gotta lead those two poor, deluded boys out of the abyss."

They tap water bottles together, the first motion of the burgeoning friendship.

"Speak it, sister," Kei intones.

...

From an aerial view of the parking lot, the cars explode in sequence, briefly taking the form of a giant **: D** made of fire before the next set of primary charges exploded and sent the cars, and the Israfels, two hundred feet above the ground.

Which is when the secondary charges detonated, forcing the cars, and the Israfels, into a compact sphere of metal, hanging in the air before the tertiary charges detonated, igniting what in the next week the heads of Section 1 would refer to as an 'ingeniously rigged small scale fusion device.'

A star, about 5 meters in diameter, comes into existence high above Tokyo-3, the intense light and heat contained by an AT Field originating deep within NERV-1, or in particular in Sheol. The light disperses, and the remaining scraps of metal descend to the ground as Nana falls to her knees and howls in victory.

"*I HAVE FOUND MY NEW GOD!"*

"That...that was completely impossible," Asuka says, "I mean...physics doesn't work that way!"

"We drive cybernetic gods," Shinji says, shrugging, "I think Nana gets a little leeway."

A manhole cover pops up. Then another, and another, and another. Green and silver Israfels climb out, close to two dozen, led by another red and silver miniature Angel. The AT Field warps the air. Music begins playing as Shinji and Asuka stare at Nana.

"Setting the mooo~ood."

"Great," Shinji sighs, turning to the still floating fish robot, "Junior! Go find Mari!"

"**Understood, Pilot Ikari."**

A blast of blue, and the Wuffletron takes off, heading due east.

"Heee~ey."

The Israfels freeze in mid move. Hopping out of the open crate, Rei walks over, high fiving Nana as she fixes her helmet back on and hops

into the duct.

"So," Rei says, "What'cha doin'?"

"I think we're going to be in a dance battle with the Angel," Shinji responds, "Did you see what happened with Mrs. Makinami?"

"Oh yeah. Dr. Sohryu set her hair on fire. I'm starting to *like* her."

Asuka steps back, shaking her head. The Angels shuffle forward, stalking them, hands out. Shinji cracks his knuckles, and Rei grins.

"Let's go."

...

Thrusters cool down as Wuffletron lands in front of the two girls, Kei blinking slightly upon seeing it. Admittedly, she was abducted by SEELE before NERV came into custody of the angel, although her sisters did go to lengths to tell her about their new puppy.

"**Good evening, Ms. Ayanami.**"

"Wuffles."

The robot shudders. The light in its eyes glow, as the purse at Mari's side shakes, shudders, and a green arm bursts from it, prying open the lip as Junior climbs out, shifting his eyes to horizontal form.

My thanks, Lilly.

:/

Junior sets himself down next to Mari, Kei staring at the two, trying to fix on what exactly she is watching.

If it helps, your mother is wrong. You are not a monster. I am...connected...to the overmind that was Sandalphon. I can read the presence of an Angel. While you are an Angel, you are not Ramiel. The soul of Ramiel has departed the Core within you. You have replaced it. Never have I known a Lilim to be able to displace an Angel within its own Core, but you have. That is an...exceptional...feat of will.

Mari smirks. She doesn't notice the wetness in her eyes, shuffling

closer to Junior.

"Really?"

Yes. I thought it would be necessary to tell you. I thought you would...appreciate that.

She nods. For some reason, he finds it necessary to put his arm around her shoulder.

"I do," she responds, placing her hand on his own, leaning in and pecking him on the edge of his large, flat snout. The two eyes go wide, and his back explodes outwards with four tentacles, causing both girls to scream in surprise.

His eyes dart from tentacle to tentacle, glistening in the moon light before turning back to Mari as his skin goes from green to brown in embarrassment.

Um...sorry. I...when I get nervous...

Which is when he's noticed one of the tentacles is wrapped around Mari's head, the girl staring at him. She raises an eyebrow, taking off her glasses and seeing them covered in a thick, slow moving fluid, sighing before her eyes go wide.

What?

She is looking past him. Turning, Junior clears his throat with a sound resembling a jammed woodchipper, just as-

"Junior! Get your tentacles *off my daughter!"*

-Pieter tackles Junior and sends them both flying.

...

"Lemme get this straight," Misato says, arms folded as she stares at the different screens in Central Dogma, "Shinji, Asuka, and Rei have engaged several mini-angels to a Dance Battle. Dr. Ikari is high as a kite. Dr. Sohryu set Mrs. Makinami on fire. And Sub Director Sohryu has engaged Junior in a fist fight to save the virginity of his daughter."

Makoto nods.

"Pretty much accurate, Ma'am."

Staring at the screens for a moment, Misato slowly retracts the cigar. Reaching into her jacket, she flicks the lighter, the tip of the cigar smoldering as she chomps back down on the end.

"I *love it* when a plan comes together."

...

From a perspective from the ground, it would seem to be something utterly, utterly wrong. A grown man in a gray suit holding on for dear life while pounding an erratically flying flat fish in the face. It would seem wrong, and yet at the same time so very, very right.

You are misinterpreting what you saw, Pieter!

"I saw the tentacles! I know what that means!"

My reproductive organs are in my mouth! It doesn't work that way!

The two bounce off a water tower, spiraling off past the field and bouncing off the ground before Junior's anti-gravity based third bladder takes over and sends them rocketing into the sky, punching, swearing, and for some reason squealing the entire way.

...

They decided to split up. Mari would double back to the school and make sure Shinji and her sister were alright. Kei would go ahead and follow the dueling men/fish thingy to warn the Commander and Little Mommy of what had happened. Thankfully, Sohryu and Wuffles' fight is taking them on a course roughly to the restaurant.

As she approaches, walking through the outskirts of Tokyo-3 and into the East End, the heavily developed cosmopolitan zone, Kei considers her plan.

She can solve this. She can salvage this night. And Little Mommy will be so proud of her.

A small, knowing smile crosses Kei's face, opting for the direct roue,

bypassing the door as she makes a vertical leap up the side of the two floor, disc shaped restaurant and into an air duct.

It takes her moments to find the convenient exit, popping open a grate and dropping gracefully into the otherwise empty dining room, hopping off the table and clearing her throat as she approaches the four.

Little Mommy turns first. She is smiling. She is..."

"Heee~ey," Yui sing-songs, "What'cha doin'?"

Kei blinks. She stares at the woman who, cosmetically, is her mother. Cosmetically, at least, because her expression, the way she's hanging off the chair, and the loopy...loop...in her eyes are *not* those of her mother.

Still, this is Kei. This is the Ree who takes the most after Yui.

So it is with no small measure of surprise for everyone involved that Kei leaps onto Yui with an animalistic scream and starts slapping her around the head and neck, carrying them both to the floor.

"So," Tomoe says, "That makes...*every* member of this branch of the family insane?"

Gendo nods.

"Indeed."

...

Part of her blonde hair is singed, her dress is soaked, but she got in a few good hits herself. Sohryu is sporting a black eye and a split lip, holding the ladle of the punch bowl in her hand as Claire growls, the two women circling each other.

"Whore," Sohryu growls.

"Bitch," Claire snarls back.

They pant, circling, slowly. Claire swings the purse, the lead pipe in it adding weight. Kyoko cracks her neck, wiping her bloodied lip on her sleeve.

Finally, after minutes of anticipation and build up, one makes the first strike.

"You couldn't even keep him!" Kyoko shouts, "At least I kept to same gender preference!"

"It's not my fault you're obsessed with him! He's not even good in bed!"

"Is too!"

"Is not!"

"If he was so bad, why did I take him back?"

"Because no other man would f_ you with someone else's dick!"

Kyoko snorts, stomping over to Claire and tossing aside the ladle. Claire drops the purse, baring teeth as the two circle.

"You did not just imply that I couldn't get a boyfriend if I wanted."

"Look at the record," Claire says, rolling her eyes, "Maybe two, three one night stands over sixteen years. A middle aged woman with two sets of baggage following her around, and then there's your reputation as the Alpha Bitch of NERV-Berlin."

"Where he was the damn Sub Director," Kyoko growls.

Claire laughs, running her hand through her singed hair.

"Exactly! I strung him along and you didn't even take the bait!"

"I don't f_ married men!"

"Kyoko, darling, eventually you're going to realize something," Claire sighs, snorting, "And that's that those limits and taboos are set up for people other than us. I saw what I wanted, and I took it. Nothing against you, personally."

"Naturally," Kyoko drawls, "I'm just *collateral* damage."

"Cynical, but true," Claire shrugs, opening her purse and taking out the clamshell mirror, "Well, this is hardly the best place to talk about this. I say we find a bar and discuss this over drinks."

Kyoko raises an eyebrow. She stares at Claire for a long moment,

shaking her head with a groan.

"Makinami, are you making a *pass* at me?"

"Well...yes."

Kyoko sighs, more out of exhaustion than anything at this point. She never knew how tiring being a bitch was before she put it on hold.

"First, you have the wrong head of Project E," Kyoko says, "Which I might add, if you did anything to hurt Ibuki, I imagine Akagi will be back soon to hand you over to the merchandise people-"

"I have my own limits," Claire interrupts, hand raised as she checks her face in the mirror, "Ibuki is an unimportant girl with a schoolyard crush, but she's a perfectly sweet girl and I wasn't coming to this dinner alone."

"And second, I imagine that most of NERV's ready to come down on you after how you treated your own daughter! If you thought they pussy-footed with me, you haven't seen what they did when they found out Asuka was *self flogging!"*

"That's not my daughter."

Kyoko sighs, walking to the far end of the gym, grabbing a chair and carrying it over. Reaching into her pocket, she takes out a hypo and jams it against Claire's neck, the woman squeaking before collapsing backwards into the chair.

"Now sit the f_ down and listen, Makinami," Kyoko says, taking out her PDA and clicking on a function, the projector built into the underside coming to life, "Because I'm going to do this *once.* And I'm going to explain exactly what happened to your daughter!"

...

Pieter, I swear that I did not make an advance on your daughter! The tentacles are my equivalent to hair!

"Prove it!"

She's not even my species! It wouldn't fit!

The fight carries them through an apartment window, the elderly

couple on the couch craning their necks over the fighting human and fish man as their brawl carries them though the apartment and out the opposite window, falling, bouncing off a passing bus and back into the sky.

They bounce off a water tower, redirecting their flight and bouncing them off a department store roof, rising into the air as Pieter continues pounding Junior in the face.

...

"YOU!"
WHACK!

"ARE!"

WHACK!

"NOT!"

WHACK!

"LIKE!"

WHACK!

"THEM!"

Alicia sips her coffee, while Tomoe sighs, turning back to Gendo only to notice a hint of concern on Gendo's face. It is not that Kei has been spending the past five minutes slapping Yui sober. It is the fact that Kei is doing this at all. All observations of the girl have told them that out of all the Ree, Kei was the least *Ree*-like, modeling herself off of Yui.

Of course, the idea that the other Ree modeled themselves off of, presumably, *Lilith,* gave them major causes for concern about what might happen if Lilith was ever freed. Many of those scenarios involved very uncomfortable use of large trees, or at very least a 200' tall Living God using a proportional squeaky mallet.

Hm. Kozou's retirement is making sense.

"So," Tomoe sighs, "Are there any other surprises you want to spring on us, or is this it?"

Two things yell overhead. Gendo looks up, taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. And right then, Junior and Pieter crash through the roof and into- and through- their table.

...

The dance battle was abruptly ended by a 15 foot in diameter blue diamond appearing overhead, with a familiar, glasses wearing girl at the center, the red gem in her throat glowing appropriately. The dance battle itself was awesome, terrifying, magnificent, and all that, but it was interrupted by everyone looking up to find what appeared on paper to be a reincarnated Ramiel. Said fears ended when the AT Field pulsed and the voice boomed.

"**I am Mari Illustrious Makinami! And you will fear my LASERFACE!**"

The diamond shifts into a ring form, hovering over the Israfels as Shinji, Asuka, and Rei run for cover. As soon as they clear, the light gathers at the center of the ring, becoming a pillar of pure force which strikes the Israfels, the concrete, and eventually one of the Geofronts armor layers.

The diamond reforms, finally retracting into a floating Mari as she hovers over before lazily flying over to the others.

"That was fun," she says with a grin.

Shinji stares at the hole, then back at Mari.

"I presume you're feeling better?"

"Yeah. Mom can suck it," Mari responds, landing with a hop, "So, let's go find everyone else. Dad picked a fight with Junior and Kei went following them. What else do we have to deal with tonight?"

Which is, naturally, when the sewer grate next to Shinji opens and Nana pulls him in.

...

Junior and Pieter circle, both breathing heavily. Junior's tentacles rise, circling in slow deliberate motions, Pieter cracking his knuckles as

they stare down each other. The shock has sobered Yui, who is watching from one of the unbroken chairs, Gendo having moved to another table to observe while Tomoe and Alicia stare, heads tilted.

They charge. Pieter swings first, followed by Junior. Both hit, as well. Although, it is Pieter's fist that hits Pieter, and Junior's fist that strikes Junior, both stumbling back, confused, before collapsing unconscious. The two portals retracts, the floating eight ball swimming through the air to Gendo.

"Good girl," he says, patting Lilly on the top of the sphere.

:3!

"What the Hell was that?" Tomoe asks.

"Classified."

Which is about the cue for Yui to begin screaming.

...

"Here's to another night on the graveyard shift," Maya sighs, raising her coffee mug in imitation of a toast, before taking a sip and getting back to work.

She headed back to NERV following the disaster of that dinner and her first 'date' in close to six months. Thankfully, Aoi had called out sick, so she had some leniency to clock in and get to work.

On nights like these, Maya found herself in her cubicle in Project E. She prefered the confines of her cubicle over her workstation on Dogma if she could help it, like she did tonight. Her own touches gave the close quarters a cozy, familiar feel, one different from the bridge. While more open, it was discomforting, especially when she was told about the story of her terminal there.

Another shiver runs down her spine, followed by a sip of the coffee as she represses childhood fears that don't seem so childish anymore. After all, who wouldn't be creeped out about leaning their workstation was where a madwoman threw herself to her death? Especially over...

"No," she says to herself, "Don't go there, Maya. You're not like her. It's completely different. You're not lusting over forbidden fruit, Sempai's

just...not interested. Besides which, she was on a date with Mr. Kaji, and maybe she'll come around, and she's already started showing interest...and now I'm talking to myself in the middle of the night."

She pinches her nose, sighing.

"Just because Sempai might like women doesn't mean anything. I put out every signal I could, and she hasn't picked up. And that kiss..."

She reaches for the box of tissues by her monitor, dabbing at the swelling tears before blowing her nose, knowing if she has the good cry she probably needs right now, her nose well run like a faucet. Just another way the young lieutenant seems as young as the Pilots, sometimes.

"Kami," she groans, burying her face in her hands, "Is it really just a crush? I must be the..."

Her train of self depreciation comes to a screeching halt as the officer phone rings. Clearing her throat past the first two rings, she dabs her eyes again and answers.

"Hello?" she asks, expecting anything but what she gets.

"*Maya? I need you.."*

The phone clicks off. The voice was low and throaty, hungry, edge with the experience of age and regular smoking. But why was she calling her of all people? Why not Dr. Ikari, whom Section 2 reported was back on the base, along with the Commander and the pilots?

"Sempai?" Maya asks, but the caller has already hung up, prompting her to do the same, before getting up and moving quickly to Ritsuko's office, her mind already racing.

Sempai never talks like that, she thinks, *And she would have gone home by now, especially since she had that date, unless...oh no. Don't tell me there's another Angel inside the base already, or worse...*

She stops in her tracks, drawing and checking her sidearm with shaking hands. She remembers the last time she did so, when what was left of the Sixth Angel possessed those people. She was relieved that she didn't have to take a life, despite the seeming loss of Mari's own.

I don't want to hurt anyone, she thinks, entering Akagi's office, *But I'm*

part of NERV and fighting Angels is what we do. Butch up, Ibuki, try not to throw up afterwards, or worse.

She looks over the dimly lit room, her pistol following her gaze, as she reaches for the main light switch. She flicks it, twice, but the overhead lights refuse to come on.

"I should have called for backup, shouldn't I?" she asks, squinting her eyes, taking a hand off her pistol to grasp the bitch of her nose, "And I really shouldn't have said that out loud."

"*May~be."*

"Rei?" Maya asks with a yelp, jumping in surprise, "Rei? Is that you?"

"*Heee~ey,"* the voice replies in the distinctive sing-song tone, as the sound of someone crawling in the ventilation duct behind the wall thumps out towards the grate. The grate, Maya notices, is already ajar, having been removed and awkwardly put back in place from the inside.

Regardless of the discrepancy, Maya puts away her gun, her anxiety fading quickly.

"Rei," she sighs, "We've been over this before. Don't play pranks that could result in friendly fire, and I thought we agreed that you'd stop pranking after ten..."

She folds her arm, tapping her foot.

"Rei, get out of that vent *right now* and look at me, you may have Angel kills but I'm still your-"

"*FUCK!"*

Her voice trails off, both from the sudden, un-Rei-like swearing and the sight of the ventilation grate being kicked out by a long leg encased in the glossy latex of a white plugsuit, which slide out like a knife through butter, followed by a posterior equally pleasing to Maya's sapphic instincts. For once, Maya realizes how the suit leaves nothing to the imagination, and from the shape Maya realizes she is not ogling children.

This is not Rei. Rei is graceful. Rei is fast, and limber. Rei does not get stuck halfway through her exit and start swearing like a sailor.

"God Dammit," Ritsuko curses, "How does she do this? How does she make this look so f_ing easy? I swear, I'm going to kill Kaji for convincing me to..."

It takes more will than Maya knew she had to keep from collapsing into laughter, but not enough to keep her from ogling.

"Maya, if you're done taking a picture, could you please help pull my fat ass out of the duct?"

...

The Pilots were found after Rei dragged Shinji from a sewer grate and engaged Nana in a kung fu fight. That, combined with Junior and Lilly being above ground, Mari manifesting fully, Dr. Sohryu and Mrs. Makinami found both transq'ed in the school gym, and a fist fight between the Sub Director of NERV and the Sandalim he believed was flirting with his daughter, has made Gendo Ikari expect death. The death was put on hold when the Mausoleum doors opened and Misato walked in, tapping her PDA. Yui grabs her sketchpad, hastily scribbling down death threats, questions, and swears.

"Section 2, report," Misato says.

"All good, Ma'am. Signals have been traced, and we've detained the moles."

Tapping the channel closed, Misato places the device back in her bomber jacket, as Yui stares at her and Gendo raises an eyebrow.

"Tokyo-3 is a company town," Misato explains, "But we've had a spy problem in the past. Any faithful NERV employee keeps what happens here in here. When we let Junior and Lilly get loose, it gave us the opportunity to crack down on any moles planted here by the Committee, JSSDF, or NHIS. We're leak free, Commander, as of now."

"So this was a sting?" Gendo asks.

"Exactly. We're air tight now. All spies are in detention. Mrs. Makinami's entrance into Tokyo-3 allowed us to commission and execute Operation FusterCluck and round up any spies we had. Sir."

Yui pinches the bridge of her nose, sighing.

"So...this was planed?" she asks, "You...planned a perfect storm of

disasters?"

"In all honesty, Dr. Ikari, you didn't hire me to watch my tits jiggle. This was one of my contingencies, and I couldn't see a more perfect opportunity for this."

She salutes, clicking her heels, and walks out.

...

After wiggling her now gel covered bottom in Maya's face for a few more minutes, Ritsuko Akagi, PhD, slips free of the ventilation duct, causing her assistant's jaw to drop as she takes a stpe back to get a full impression. Her eyes trail upwards, past the long, sculpted legs and round hips, the outline at their juncture ignored by choice to follow the zipper that starts at the flat belly upwards between the ample bosom, where the cold of the duct has...

Which is when Maya realizes she staring, and looks at her Sempai in the face to see the changes there; pink lips made blue, skin made up and powdered to resemble the First Chid's complexion, drawing out the beauty mole and the deep green of her eyes, but the biggest change is that her chestnut brown hair as been died the same unnatural pale blue of the Ree.

"Maya," Ritsuko says, "You're drooling."

Maya snaps back to reality, wiping her face and flushing as red as her face can manage.

"I didn't say you should stop," Ritsuko says, breathily, and sashays forward, the rubber of the plugsuit squeaking with each step.

Like a deep in headlights, Maya freezes in place, as the woman she has adored and pursued for so long wraps her arms around her shoulders with obvious intent, blue stained lips first pecking at her lips, before meeting her in a breath stealing kiss...

That ends as soon as it begins, as Ritsuko steps back, shaking her heads.

"No," Ritsuko says, tone regretful, "Not like this. I...I can't."

No word from the younger woman.

"I shouldn't have done this. God, you're like everyone's younger sister, Maya, I just..."

"S-Sempai?"

"I haven't had any since my freshman year at college, Maya," Ritsuko says, leaning on the table, "You know what that's like? Ten years of lonely nights, ten years of endless frustration. When I...reacted to you in that...suit I thought that I was gay, but it's the same thing with women. I have no idea what I'm doing wrong, but I have to be doing something, because even a complete bitch like Sohryu can get a man like Pieter."

Another sigh, slamming her hand against the table.

"So, I took Kaji's advice and did something spontaneous. I was dumb enough to ask myself, 'What would Rei do' and do it anyway. I abused my authority, accessed your personal records, found out your secrets and...interests...with certain prototypes. I though if I could seduce you, I'd...sorry. I've f_ed it all up because of my libido. I'll understand if you want to transfer to Dr. Ikari. I aw how you two went at it in the coat closet when we went out drinking-"

"What?" Maya asks.

"When we went out drinking," Ritsuko explains, "I walked in on you and Dr. Ikari. She passed out drunk right after and so did you, so I got you home while Misato carried her. I made sure the MAGI didn't keep any records of what happened, just to be on the safe side."

Maya blinks.

"S-sempai," Maya says, tapping her fingers, "That...I don't see Dr. Ikari like...that. We were blind stinking drunk, and I thought she was...I thought she was going to sack me the day after for being so stupid, I..."

Ritsuko looks her in the eye. Slapping her palm over her face.

"Oh God," she sighs, "Misato was wrong. You really are straight, aren't you?"

Which is the last straw. A change comes over the young lieutenant, her innocent, caring face shadowed with dark humor and predatory hunger as she crosses the distance and Ritsuko gets only a moment to squeak in surprise before Maya dips her and frenches her as hard as

she can.

This is all Ritsuko's sharp mind can process before her assistant tackles her to the ground, rational thought giving way to the base and carnal instincts of mindless animals, as the animal that is normally Ritsuko Akagi knows she has at last found a worthy mate...

...

Kei looks up as the door to the bedroom she currently shares with Rei opens, to see Yui walking in. She has not said anything since Section 2 escorted her back to the apartment, tapping her fingers together as she awaits her punishment. She winces, knees drawn to her chest, waiting as Yui walks over and sits next to her on the large bed.

"So," Yui says, "I understand you were the one who found Mari, and you had a little chat with her. You've been having some...problems...in Tokyo-3, and Section 2 forwarded me your entire transcript."

Kei nods. Her eyes are already wet, and she knows that she is not in physical danger but she can't help but feel that cold pit of fear in her gut.

A coldness, a chill, which disappears entirely when Yui wraps her arms around her and pulls her into a hug. Once again, the finely oiled machine that is the mind of Kei Ayanami locks up, faced once more with the paradox that is her views of the world transposed with the reality. Little Mommy should be furious, after all. She failed in nearly every one of her tasks, didn't she?

"Good girl," Yui says, pressing her lips to the top of Kei's head, "I'm very proud of you. You did wonderfully tonight. I don't know what we would have done if you didn't talk Mari down."

This is all a ploy, Kei tells herself, This is all Little Mommy trying to pry her away from what the Chairman told her. She has an important task. She can't let her get distracted by every little thing with her family.

So why, Kei asks herself, is she crying?

...

Deep within NERV, Pieter Sohryu looks across the bench in the cell at his cell mate. Junior is still staring at him, a patch along his flat face while Pieter sports several bruises.

"Well?"

The Bro Code is clear: Thou shalt not hit on Thy Bros Daughter.

Pieter sighs, nodding, holding out a fist. Junior holds out his own, and two exchange their reconciliation fist bump before falling into silence.

And another day dawns on Tokyo-3.

Chapter 55: Reiproduction

There was something of a buzz in Project E the next day. Maya Ibuki was, to put it simply, everyone's friend, and they all considered the possibility that Mrs. Makinami was going to take advantage of her. Such possible contingencies as 'track her', 'hack her bank account' and 'tell Zwei she's a squirrel' were bandied about, but were quickly dismissed as 'problematic,' 'unethical,' and 'getting the meat out of Zwei's grill.'

Which is all moot, Misato realizes, as she stands in the hallway outside of the junction between Sections 1 and 2 and watches Maya Ibuki skip past. She scratches her head, shrugs, and turns just as the new bluenette Ritsuko Akagi walks down the hallway.

"I'm going to ask anyway," Misato says, "What happened?"

"Last night," Ritsuko says, no small measure of satisfaction in her voice, "I seduced Lieutenant Ibuki."

Misato sips at her coffee.

"I don't know whether to deck you or give you a high five."

Chapter 55: Reiproduction

The school had reopened, allowing them to enroll her to, as they put it, 'socially normalize' her. A scoff, internal. There is *nothing* normal about her from their perspective, and nothing normal about *them* from her perspective. Normality is but a measure of perspective, after all, and the sooner they realize that start truth, they will become more oh great she's monologuing again.

Stepping in front of the class in Tokyo-3 Municipal High School, a hush falls over the classroom as she clears her throat. For a moment, they believe her to be someone else. Gently raising her hand, she points to the back of the room. Everyone turns.

Rei waves at them, smiling.

"Greetings," Kei says, "I am Kei Ayanami. I am, in accordance with the

cover story you have swallowed as the sheep you are, Rei's long lost sister, recently adopted by the Ikaris. I will let you draw your own conclusions."

From the back of the room, one of the students emits a high pitched, girlish scream despite being on the men's soccer team. Several follow in suit, before Kensuke Aida, faithful minion that he is to the Ayanami line, jumps onto his desk and executes the rest of her opening gambit.

"She's discovered mitosis!" he screams, "Rei can *bud!"*

The room breaks out into screams, as Kei begins to walk back to her desk. The screams stop as quickly as they began under the stone grinding gaze of Hikari Horaki. Yes, Kei thinks, definitely a strong will. She will be a worthy opponent.

...

The viewscreen clicks off, retracting into the table. Standing around the table in the briefing room, used as an impromptu theatre, Yui Ikari takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes, smacking herself to try to tell herself that was all just a very bad dream. But no. She is awake. She saw that. Now she's trying to figure out *what it was.*

"What did I just see?"

"The season finale," Pieter explains, slumping into one of the swivel chairs, "As it turns out, the MAGI has been rewriting the scripts at Gainax. So technically, the *Ree* wrote the anime."

"I...that made no *sense.* Why was Shinji sitting in a metal folding chair? Why was everyone congratulating him? What the *Hell* was going on there?"

"I know. The first dozen episodes were fine, if a little existential."

"Then it got *weird.* And uncomfortable. If I didn't know the girls were probably joking and doing that to see if they could get away with it, I'd be worried that they all had severe issues."

Pieter stares at her. It wasn't that anyone at NERV didn't like the Ayanami sisters, it was that no one at NERV ever put the words 'Ree' and 'normal' in the same sentence, unless pointing out something along the lines of 'it's normal for the Ree to make you jump as duct

vents,' or 'it's normal for the Ree to strip an elephant to the bone in six minutes,' or 'it's normal for the Ree to kidnap a polar bear.'

"Respectfully," Pieter sighs, "The test audiences liked it. The director was surprised, but said we should release it anyway. He's making a follow up movie."

"Hopefully it won't be as confusing."

"As long as the Ree don't switch out his meds."

...

Logging on chat room.

TEHREI: Sooooo how are you liking school?

Kei: It is fine. I have no complaints.

Shinji: Were you testing Hikari, Kei?

Kei: Possibly. I wish to assess the strengths of everyone involved. I have come to the conclusion that real people are harder to predict than virtual projections.

TEHREI: I know! I mean, while Iti and Zyuu cornered Kensuke, they thought he'd just bounce back like the whole game with 'hide the PVC pipe' they made in the simulation, but once they got three feet in and he started crying, well. Stuff.

Shinji: What.

ProfessorAsuka: That seems wrong.

TEHREI: I know! Then he started squirming! And the pipe broke! And then the turnip got used and then Maya found them and everyone was crying and screaming and the polar bear was angry.

Kei: …

Shinji has logged off.

ProfessorAsuka has logged off.

Kei: Tell me more.

The school bell rings. Shinji and Asuka close their lap tops, looking at each other, turning to Shinji's left to find Kei staring intently at the screen and the IM chat she is having with Rei. Shinji peaks over her shoulder. Blood drains from his face, and he turns to Kensuke, who has a blissful smile on his face.

"That's wrong," he sighs.

He turns back to Asuka, who is furiously typing in a coding program. The room empties as the lunch bell rings, Kei shooting them both a glance before rising and joining the exiting crowd. After all, Mom insisted, she has to be able to socialize with people other than family, albeit Rei's there to introduce her.

"So, what is that?" he asks.

"Dr. Ikari's working on a new, life size avatar body for Ichi," Asuka says, "About the size of a six year old girl. They scheduled a birthday party for next week, so I've been working on the bluetooth protocols so it will be ready by then."

"Okay. Thought 'life size' meant sixty meters. When is the party?"

She taps her track pad, bringing up a calender.

"Really?" he asks, "But...that's when Mom had the Contact experiment."

Asuka nods.

"I t-talked about it with Dr. Ikari," Asuka explains, "She says that Ichi actually became aware about two years after that, but th-thinks that the Contact Experiment had a major role in creating her intelligence. So, they d-decided that the Contact Experiment was her birthday."

He nods, scratching the back of his head. The computer beeps, and Asuka turns back to it, narrowing her eyes at the new email message.

"What is it?" he asks.

"Mother," she sighs, "Mother wants you to have dinner with us next week."

...

Loading virtual environment: Grass Field . Env.

Participants: Ikari, Ichi; Sohryu, Kyoko; Kirishima, Capt. Mana; Prime, JA

The green field appears first as an outline, slowly shifting into reality as the three participants appear. Ichi, in the form of a six year old girl with brown hair and blue eyes, looks up as Kyoko appears, visibly taken aback by the virtual avatar of Unit 01.

"Hello, Doctor Sohryu," Ichi says with a smile, "Mommy wanted me to apologize for sneezing on you."

"Apologies accepted," Kyoko says, raising an eyebrow before shaking her head, turning as Mana visualizes, "Kirishima, we're here to see what form JAP's new virtual intelligence has taken."

"Yep," Mana says, looking down and noticing that for some reason, her virtual appearance is in the Suit, "Huh. Well, you said the Prime's mind's gonna be based off me, right?"

"More or less. The Synthesis system created a persona based on your subconscious. It will be a representation of you."

A new pillar of digitized light, stemming from the ground, as it rises into a vaguely humanoid, female shape. Kyoko adjusts her glasses, Ichi smiles from ear to ear, and Mana folds her arms, watching as her partner, her other half, someone whom she should know like the back of her hand appears.

The resulting figure manifests fully, two white shoes landing on the grass. A full head shorter than Mana, she is in a pink and white, sectioned dress that appears to be made of metal plates similar to Jet Alone's armor. The hat covered her short red hair falls in two sectioned tails ending at her waist, as she opens deep brown eyes and clasps her hands at her flat chest, smiling demurely.

"What the fuck?" Mana asks.

Kyoko, sensing what was to come, covered Ichi's ears preemptively. Keeping the hands where they are, she watches as Mana's jaw drops, seeing her shy, short, very *ladylike* avatar built from her subconscious.

"Seriously, what the *fuck? This* is my subconscious?"

Jet Alone Prime's virtual avatar falls to her knees and starts crying, Ichi rushing forward to comfort her, Mana ranting about how there is

no possible way that her subconscious could look this possibly needy.

Which is when the alert klaxons started wailing and the virtual world faded away.

...

"Blue Pattern Detected! Angel is emerging from Tokyo-3 Harbor!"

The Big Screen shifts, showing the bubbling waters off the japanese coast as the first signs of the Angel appear. The rounded shoulders rise first, the gangly limbs rising as the rest of the massive body, measured at over 600' tall, rises. Buildings are already retracting into the city proper, Tokyo-3 shifting to Fortress Mode.

"That's not right," Pieter says, already at his station next to the Commander, "We already killed that Angel!"

"The Angel had two cores," Yui answers back, as Kyoko walks onto the bridge, the virtual interface gloves still on her hands, "Junior! How did the Angel gain that much mass!"

Junior appears, the transparent hologram from Sheol manifesting in the middle of Central Dogma.

Israfel gains mass and weight by consuming matter. From my link with its overmind, I see that Israfel's second core consumed a pod of Blue Whales.

"That'll do it," Misato says, folding her arms, "Alright. Here's what we're doing. Get Mana into JAP and have it powered up. Section 2 is en-route with all three Children. We're going to see if we can entice the Angel into dividing again and engage it four on four."

Maya squeaks in surprise. The bridge officers turn, Ristuko walking over and leaning over Maya's shoulders to stare at the screen.

"Well, *shit."*

"Ritsuko?"

Yui walks over to the console screen. Her eyes go wide, a word that is not found in any dictionary escaping her lips as she turns to the screen just as the crane moves into position.

"Report," Gendo says, standing.

"If I'm reading this right," Maya says, still staring at the screen, "The MAGI has just seized control of 95% of all the construction vehicles in Tokyo-3. And now I'm seeing these modifications that have been done to them over the past week that wasn't listed in the maintenance reports until now!"

...

It was child's play to sneak off of school grounds. And technically, lunch is not over yet and high school sophomores can leave school grounds for their lunch period. This should be over shortly, anyway. Standing on the top of the nearest ammo building, Kei cracks her knuckles, PDA in her right hand.

"Modifications are finished?" she asks.

"*Yep!*" the other six voices sing song through the communications link, *"We tested'em and everything! It'll work perfectly!"*

"Good. Begin sequence. Transfer manual control towards me. Mark."

Behind her, a VTOL slaved to her PDA rises.

...

"What is she doing?" Akagi yells, the Big Screen focused entirely on Kei.

"MAGI has finished deliberating! Response received!"

Above the Big Screen, the four cores of the MAGI glow in agreement and one message is laid out for all to see in perfect clarity.

FORM DEVASTATOR.

"Mari!" Pieter screams, "Vacation's *OVER!"*

...

The two dump trucks fire the rockets newly installed on their undercarriage, flipping up as a pair of construction haulers take position underneath. Explosive charges fuse the two sets into feet and legs, nanite modifications forming joints and tendons as the wrecking ball crane makes up one half of the torso and leg arm.

"Joints set! Interlocks online!"

Two bulldozers stack on each other for the right side of the torso, new modifications testing out for the shovels to shoot out as battering rams, a steam shovel attached for the right arm, forming an impromptu fist.

"Turbines to full!"

DING.

"Fries up!"

"Wait, where did we put the five keys?"

"No, stupid, that's when we make Voltron! We're making Devastator!"

"But I wanted to use lions!"

"Next time, Zyuu. Kei's idea, Kei chooses the giant robot."

"Okay..."

The VTOL hovers over the body as more and more construction equipment joins the gestalt thanks to the nanite tendrils, quickly going from a skeletal mashup of disparate machines into a seamless, armored giant as big as the massive Angel. Several girders are laid down, forming into the impromptu neck. Watching from the rooftop as the VTOL begins to lower itself, Kei grins.

"And I'll form the head."

Israfel's face shifts, twisting slightly in confusion. This can't be right, it thinks, there's no way the Lilim could actually build something that ridiculous. That thought echoes through its head for a moment. Then another thought comes as it realizes the wrecking ball has created a thunder clap.

So, Israfel thinks, Force is mass times acceleration.

So, the wrecking ball breaking the sound barrier should hurt. A lot.

And serendipity, it was right.

...

Cage 2 is mostly empty, thanks to everyone clearing out to watch a 600' tall robot made out of construction vehicles wail on the Angel. So, when Rei kicks out the ventilation grate and drops onto the walkway, she has no one she has to abduct, knock out, or toss into the LCL lake.

"Hey, Zwei!" she says, waving at the four eyed Evangelion, "Wanna help me kill an Angel?"

The four eyes light up.

"**ANGEL?**"

...

A new set of klaxons blair. Maya has surrendered her seat, working at her console standing while Yui sits in the comfortable swivel chair, watching the Big Screen.

"No, let me guess," Yui says, "Rei has hijacked Unit 02 and has had the MAGI, which is right now the Ree, send her to the surface. Am I right?"

...

The keywords were "Ree" "Giant Robot" and "Built." Hence the television screens in the lounge were keyed in to the surveillance cameras on the surface so anyone who was so inclined could watch the giant robot beat down of the Angel. As the Reetron lays into Israfel with its wrecking ball flail, Shinji and Asuka watch from the comfort of the lounge on floor B-12.

"Yeah," Shinji says, "I could see this being Hatchi's idea, but Nana would put together the weapons. But Kei really thought out the design. Normally, the girls wreck Kei's stuff, but they really did miss

her."

"How d-do you know all this?" Asuka asks.

He shrugs.

"I'm trying to be a better brother."

The Section 2 agent hands them a bowl of popcorn, both thanking him with a smile as he retreats to the other couch, where the Section 2 detail is watching the brawl.

"Do you ever wonder why everyone's so much friendlier here?" he asks, "I mean, compared to those other worlds the Angel sent us to?"

"I think it's Rei."

"Really?" he asks.

She nods, munching on a handful of popcorn as they watch Reetron unleash its right arms, to the chuckles of Section 2.

"*Ha ha,*" one comments, "Angel in a woodchipper!"

"I think," Asuka says, tilting her head as she watches the carnage, figuring out how exactly it works, "If Rei decided to do her own thing, there's not a lot NERV could do to stop her. So Dr. Ikari decided to give Rei a reason to like humanity..."

"And gave her a childhood," Shinji says, and sighs, nodding, "Yeah, sounds like something Mom would do. She's always very practical about that. All the biological weapon around here have nice personalities. Zwei could probably take over a nation, but he melts if you give him a belly rub."

She nods, leaning against him. They turn back to the battle just in time for the wrecking ball to shatter Israfel's face.

...

The massive Angel goes down, taking an ammo building with it. Zwei charges as it goes down, both Progressive Knives already unsheathed, extending its AT Field as Reetron brings its wrecking flail back for another strike. On the ammo building overlooking the battle, Kei has a smile of pure, childlike contentment on her face. There is a difference

between building these things in the virtual world of MAGI-00 and building them in the real. Much more compensation for error.

Much more SCIENCE.

As Unit 02 jams both knifes into the core of the Angel and the Angel begins to crumble, she gives one last command to the giant mecha to finish the job. The wrecking flail swings, shattering the Angel's graying remains, the shockwave rocking Tokyo-3 with the full force of a multi-ton wrecking ball traveling at Mach 1.

It also causes the ammo building to list, eliciting a very girlish squeak from Kei.

Maybe it is time to find a new vantage point, she thinks, and quickly exits.

...

"Alright. The Angel's officially dead. We do have problems with the mini Angels but the MAGI is telling us that they have no blue signal and are basically animals. The MAGI also wants one as a pet."

Sighing, Pieter removes his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose. Some days, he doesn't believe that he reads some of the reports he does. But then again, he also read a report last night of his daughter having a 'laserface', so it comes with the territory. Perhaps it was that budding horror of realizing his little girl could blast through three layers of Geofront armor that made him realize what sort of situations the Ikaris were in. Well, at least he just has two girls, and one is still classified as human.

Tapping the PDA closed, standing in the debriefing room in front of the pilots, Kei, and Dr. Ikari, he clears his throat.

"Additionally," he explains, "Kei's construct has gone dormant and disassembled itself. MAGI analysis is that it took the AT Fields of all six Rei to make it work and punch through the Angel's own field. The...robot...was there because they thought it looked cool."

"And which is why they did not wreck it," Kei says with a small grin.

Yui shrugs, leaning against the room's table.

"I'm just glad she used it to destroy an Angel and not take over Tokyo-3," she explains, "Well, good work then. Dismissed."

They leave, Rei going to lengths on how *awesome* the Reetron was as they do, the doors closing behind them.

"You're taking this in stride," Pieter observes.

"Not much I can do about it," Yui responds, "Kei is Kei. She's possibly the most intelligent of her sisters and she has a spark to that intelligence much like my own. If I tried to stifle that intelligence, it would destroy her."

"Still. Giant robot."

"Yes, and I may have to give her a half-hearted lecture about misusing NERV properties," Yui sighs, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. So, family dinner on Monday?"

He nods.

"Good. Because Tuesday is the big day."

Pieter raises an eyebrow.

"Big day?" he asks, tapping on his PDA again and cycling through his schedule, "What event...oh. *Oh*."

Yui turns, flipping through camera views to the auxiliary hangar, just as the technicians begin hosing down the massive cone.

"It's Ichi's birthday," she explains, "And the first birthday she had that she got to spend with her big brother."

...

There was still an hour left to school following the Angel's spectacular demise. That went without any problems, even with the subtle power struggle between Kei and Hikari which Mari found, nonetheless, hilarious. No one's seen Mana today, but she was at NERV with some sort of experiment. Still, normality is good. Even if she's wearing that special choker to hide the Core in her throat, she likes feeling normal.

Which, of course, is interrupted by the bushes near the tree she was sitting at moving, and an Israfel peaks its head out. Looking from side

to side, the Mini-Angel hops out, walking over with an exaggerated gait.

"Yeah?" Mari asks.

Yeah, Ramiel. Sorry if we're, y'know, annoying you.

Mari sighs, sitting cross-legged underneath the shade of the tree, peaking over her shoulder to find the other students already on their way home.

"What's up with you?" she asks.

That's both cores. We're done. But, you sort of didn't blow up one Core. We did, instead.

She raises an eyebrow, folding her arms.

"Really?"

Yeah. We sort of like it here. Maybe once in a while, one of us will get all the smarts, but for the most part? I think we're gonna just mix in. You know, find a niche. Join nature.

"You're going native?"

The Israfelim stands a little taller, hands on its exaggerated hips.

We're alpha pests. You'know, getting in everywhere. Like rats with laser beams. So, we're joining nature, not trying to over write it. Why not? The Lilim seem to have some good ideas, outside of the whole 'pump out smoke' thing, but if you didn't, we wouldn't have the toys we steal. So, just lettin' you know, Rami. We aren't going for the Prize anymore.

The Israfel looks from side to side. It scratches the top of its head, nodding, turning to the bushes where another dozen Israfelim peak their heads out.

Um...just, if Zeruel asks? Tell him we're dead, okay? No one wants to ever piss him off.

Mari nods.

"I...don't have a lot of Ramiel's memories," she says, "What happens if Zeruel...or whoever he is...gets pissed off?"

The Israfelim turns back to Mari. It seems to make a sighing motion nodding.

Ramiel, you have to listen. Imagine a being with a heartbeat that could move an island. A gaze that can burn down a mountain. More power in his little pinky then we have in our full, entire form. Imagine something that early Lilim wrote about, thinking it was Omnipotent, Almighty, and a vengeful God. Imagine that, and maybe you can imagine Zeruel.

The Israfelim holds up its hand, the two fingers up.

Peace out.

And with that, it jumps into the bushes and is gone.

...

It is later, much later, that Kei is lying on the bed she shares with Rei. The events of the day replay themselves in her mind to the tune of her sister's snoring. It was glorious, magnificent. She built a giant robot that went Sickhouse on the Angel, completely destroying it and, once more, getting praise from Little Mommy in the process.

It is only later that she realizes that it goes against her modus operandi to do so. She would find other, practical ways. She would find a way to use Science on the Angel's core. Wouldn't she?

It is only later, as the blissful smile flattens out and she raises an eyebrow in consternation, that she realizes the Reetron was a very *Ree* thing to do.

"What'cha doin'?" Rei asks, rolling onto her side and staring at her sister.

Kei is silent, for a moment. An answer comes unbidden from her lips.

"Stuff."

She deflates a little. Maybe, now in the real world, she is very much showing her Reeishness.

But really, she asks herself.

Is that a bad thing?

Chapter 56: Brokeback Evangelion

"Of course, Chairman. I am following them. I will make sure that their...experiment...does not do any permanent harm to either of them. Yes, I will pick up milk on my way back."

Sighing, Annette closes the phone, peaking around the corner as she enters the downtown Berlin street. She followed the two, as per both her own concerns and the Chairman's orders, especially since Mr. Nagisa 'convinced' the Chairman to let them leave the Estate to pursue this plan.

Bonding, they called it.

She hopes it was that. The other possibility that Uri coughed in his hand when she caught them leaving fills her with dread. And maybe turns her on. She's not sure, though, since Uri has been her only boyfriend and while Mr. Nagisa is technically her *owner* (although he burned any such documents the moment she was given to him), well...

Enough of that.

There is a sound she hears, of tearing souls and violent crying, and she picks up speed, her heels traded in for cross trainers this brisk Berlin morning, skidding to a stop as she enters the park, and finds them. But not doing anything objectionable, obscene, or horrifying.

No, Kaworu Nagisa and Uriel Sohryu are currently bent over a trash can and vomiting, two mostly full cans of beer at their feet.

"Lightweights," Annette sighs.

Chapter 56: Brokeback Evangelion

The door opens with a slight creak, and mischievous grin on his face, Pieter Sohryu sticks his head in. For his efforts, he gets a stress ball thrown at his head, squeaking in surprise and pulling out as it ricochets off the wall and back to its master's hand. The door opens fully this time, admitting him into the office as he stares with a dejected look upon his ex wife.

"What was that for?" he asks.

"If you have to ask, I'm not telling you," Kyoko responds, not looking up from her monitor, typing with one hand and squeezing the stress ball with her other, "You're second in command of NERV, Pieter. Don't you have something better to do than make booty calls?"

He stares at her. Hands in his pocket, he blinds, taking a moment to visually examine the sprawling diagrams layering the office walls, pretending to understand it.

"I thought you were going to be nicer," he says.

"I was going to be nicer to Uri, Asuka, and Mari," Kyoko responds, tossing the stress ball absently at him, bouncing it off his chest and back to her hand, "I have come to the conclusion you are well and truly deserving of my wrath, and if you ever wish to have the honor of pleasuring me again, you will do so while satisfying a list of conditions I am sending to your PDA."

His PDA beeps. Tapping open the email, his eyes go wide, blinding before pinching the bridge of his nose.

"A leotard?"

"Among other things," Kyoko responds, still not looking up from her monitor, "Pieter, you impregnated another woman. More importantly, you impregnated Makinami. I love you dearly, which is why I am settling with making you my personal cabana boy."

"Kyoko-"

"Now *DANCE!"*

Upon her shout, he sighs and begins tap dancing, finding that the uniform shoes given by NERV have a wonderful acoustic value to them, and that Kyoko replaced the carpet with a wood floor. Apparently for just such an occasion.

Click.

He turns, still dancing to see Mari close the camera and wave before putting an arm around a stock still Asuka's shoulders.

"See, 'Ska?" Mari observes, "Our parents are even weirder than you and Shinji."

...

"I've come to the conclusion that alcohol was a bad idea for two reasons. First, we are sixteen and therefor under the legal age. Second, I think our Nephilem nature reacts badly with it."

Annette watches the two, having escorted them back to the Estate. Mister Nagisa's influence of the Chairman is still strong, and Chairman Kihl is currently at the local Elementary School helping to bake brownies.

There will be Hell to pay, later.

Sighing, Annette watches as the two continue to schedule their male bonding. Which is, in and of itself, precisely besides the point. Then again, Mr. Nagisa has always been a bit on the anal retentive side, scheduling everything within minute precision. Of course, many of those things subsequently go spectacularly wrong, but that, he would protest, is besides the point.

"Look," Uri says, sitting on the couch opposite his brother, "I think maybe, just maybe, we're trying too hard. We get along just fine, and isn't that all that actually matters?"

Kaworu shifts his brow, scratching his head.

"Mm...you may have a point."

Uri sighs, frustration obvious in his voice. It is not that there is a friction between the two. The problem is that neither of them have any real social skills to begin with, so actually being able to connect to one another seems to be beyond them, at least past a superficial level.

"Wait," Annette chimes in.

Sighing, she walks over, arms folded, lips pursed, the same look her Aunt always uses when she decides she doesn't want to passively observe these matters. Now, she muses, may be the time to assume direct control.

"Mr. Nagisa," she says, "If you try too hard, you'll only end up putting a wall between yourself and Uri."

"You have a point," Kaworu sighs, "Your suggestions?"

The fact that Mari and Asuka were at NERV today wasn't what concerned Shinji. What concerned him was that, in order for everyone to not think Asuka and Mari were at NERV, Mom decided to test one of the new projects; the life sized Avatars.

Mari's Avatar was being run by Kiko, who they decided with her tendency to smoosh people's faces in her breasts would be an appreciable substitute. Instead, 'Mari' has been relatively sedate. It may be, as Mom theorized, that Kiko is only really attracted to Sohryus, which does disturb Shinji slightly that one of his sisters has a thing for his girlfriend and her mom.

No, the problem is that the Avatar dressed up as Asuka has, in order, entered the classroom through the third floor window, constructed a crude crossbow using a pencil, three rubber bands and part of the desk, and beaten the living crap out of three upper classmen who, according to security cameras, were 'perving' on Asuka when she first arrived in Tokyo-3.

"Rei," he sighs, watching as 'Asuka' has engaged Mana in a fist fight, a 'duel of honor' as 'Asuka' put it, "Why is Go-kun in control of the avatar?"

"We~ell, originally, it was going to be Zyuu," Rei responds, tapping her fingers as the first set of blows echoes through the school grounds, Mana having put 'Asuka' through a tree to the horrified view the entire school population.

"And?"

"Well, Little Mommy didn't like the idea of Zyuu, you know, getting you. And stuff."

'Asuka' has picked up their teacher's car and used it as a baseball bat on Mana, launching her onto the roof before 'Asuka' launches herself in a vertical run up the side of the school.

"I don't see this ending well," Kei observes, standing on Shinji's other side, "How do we explain how Asuka can suddenly fight Mana to a standstill?"

"Her plug suit does have a powered exoskeleton," Shinji says with a shrug, as Mana pile drivers 'Asuka' off the roof, "She could always

demonstrate what it could do. Say, Rei, you didn't happen to modify the avatar body, did you?"

A plume of plasma and fire manifests around 'Asuka', wrapping around 'her' right hand and forming into a drill composed entirely of oscillating flame as she screams in triumphant glory.

"Forget I asked," Shinji says, as he, Rei, and Kei snap out and put on their sunglasses.

The two collide, a burst of electricity from Mana's Arc Reactor and 'Asuka's' Drill Breaker, which clears all the vegetation in the 10 yard radius around them and gives everyone a suntan.

As it is, the recess bell rang before they could break out the mechs.

...

The sun is hanging at its noon position, and the two are seated in an open air cafe near the Estate, in the outskirts of Berlin. The small lunch of cheese and bread is half eaten between them, Uri sipping his coffee as Annette sits next to him on the bench, her head on his shoulder.

"It's...weird," he sighs, "Everything."

"What about, everything?"

He sighs, slowly, almost hesitantly placing his hand on hers.

"Mother has been...better," he says, "Asuka keeps emailing me updates. It looks like Mother is actually feeling sorry for all the things she did to Asuka, and trying to make up for it."

"That's good, isn't it?"

He sighs, looking past her, out towards downtown Berlin.

"I...don't know."

It takes effort to say those words. To admit ignorance. For a long, long time he has prided himself on being right, on being exact. But the idea, he thinks, that one of the cornerstones of his life were held up in such error...hurts.

"For my entire life, I kept telling myself I was protecting my sister," he says, "Then, I find out I was just helping make things worse."

She sighs. He gets like this, she realizes. He was like this when they saw the Room, like this when his mother came to visit.

"If it helps," Annette says, patting his hand, "You might have always been confused. You were still angry when you came to Berlin. Now you're not."

He nods, sighing. She begins to speak again, to explain to him how different it is from how he first came here, confused and lost, and how he is now. Still lost, yes, but more in a cute puppy way than an angry young man way.

Or at least, would have, before the gunshots rang out.

People scream, and Uri reacts first, grabbing Annette by the wrist and pulling her to her feet to a straight run towards the Estate and safety. Or at least, until a bullet slams into his shoulder, his entire body spasming as he pitches back with a gurgle and Annette screams, just before the cloth comes over her mouth and her body goes limp.

Picking himself up, desperately not wanting to die, Uri dives, ducking behind a fruit stand as bullets fly past, painting the stone wall behind him with cherries and pears, the sound of tires squealing away as he breathes in ragged gasps, hand clasped at the wound on his shoulder, his vision red and blurry.

And then the air shifts, the wind picking up. Several men scream, sent flying by some unseen force, and the fruit stand is tossed aside like paper.

"Uri," Kaworu says, "I'm here."

...

This is the only time he has not seen him talkative. Kaworu was silent the entire time back from Berlin, after patching him up by, as he stated, 'bringing his nature to fore.' Which means that somehow, Kaworu made Uri access his own Angelic abilities. Something Uri does not want to dwell on. He just tells himself it was Nagisa doing that, not himself. But that isn't important. While Nagisa tracks down one lead, Uri tracks down another.

One of the buildings on the far end of the Estate houses their security detail. A security detail, he notes with some anger, that was nowhere to be seen when he and Annette were attacked.

All of them are identical. Faint blonde, perhaps white hair, eyes hidden under sunglasses. From what Nagisa told him, either they are altered in some way to be more effective, or they are all clones. Possibly clones of Nagisa. He isn't sure. He doesn't care.

He slams the doors open. Smoke is heavy in the air, and at least two dozen of the identical agents are there, eating and drinking, talking about matters over his head. A bar, more or less, even if he's never been in a proper one. They all turn as he enters, standing at the center of the room, leaning against one of the support columns.

"You weren't there when we were attacked," he says, "There's a reason for that. That means you were in league with our attackers. I want names, now. So I can effect a rescue."

They stand. They surround him, and he sighs. He honestly could have thought this out better. One places a hand, large and meaty, on his shoulder and squeezes, trying to hold him in place.

Of course, that's the thing, isn't it? He's let others tell him what to do his entire life, even as the agents around him tell him to leave. Closing his eyes, he takes a deep breath. Always weakness. Always substandard. Even when piloting the most advanced weapon on the planet, he was substandard, wasn't he? Synch score lower than the others...

"And we won't report this," the Agent behind him says, "This will be dismissed. Without incident."

Uri grins.

"No," he says, "Not without incident."

He twists, grabbing the wrist, spinning it around and pressing down as the Agent screams and forces him down to his knees before a swift kick knocks him unconscious. The Agents converge, two trying to grab him. He reacts faster, ducking underneath them, a swift uppercut to one's groin sending him bent over into a knee to the noise before Uri spins and slams his heel into another's stomach.

"My synch score *sucks,"* Uri growls, "Which means I have to think faster than any damn pilot does. So I'm faster than you. I'm stronger

than you. If you do not give me an answer in five minutes, half of you will be unconscious. Five minutes later, everyone else. Decide."

...

The two guards at either side of the doorway to Kihl's study only notice him enter before they are picked up by an invisible force and hurled to the far walls, slamming into opposite ends of the Chairman's personal library and falling to the floor in a pile of priceless hardbound books. Kihl says nothing, watching impassively as Kaworu enters, his eyes bloodshot and glowing, the computer monitors lining the walls shorting out.

"That is coming out of your stipend," Kihl observes.

Kaworu extend his hand. Kihl's desk shatters, and the Chairman is lifted into the air by an invisible force, yanked across the office and directly in front of Kaworu.

"Where. Is. She?"

Suspended in mid air, at the mercy of his ward, Lorenz Kihl smiles.

"Why, Tabris," he says, "What makes you think I had anything to do with this?"

Kaworu's face twists in a rare snarl, and Kihl is hurled across the room and into his chair, the joints in both the reinforced frame and the man himself creaking as Kihl chuckles, tenting his fingers on his lap as Kaworu advances on him.

"Nothing like this could happen without you wanting it, Kihl," Kaworu growls, his eyes glowing and pinning his father figure to the chair, "Answer me!"

Kihl taps his fingers. One of the computer screens lights up.

"Tabris, despite what you believe, I am *not* a master of human nature," he responds, "Miss Annette's kidnappers are members of a delusional extremist group. One of many that has cropped up following Second Impact. I was just going over their list of demands. You're welcome to read it. I have no intention of fulfilling them, and they have no intention of allowing her to survive to the next sunrise."

Kaworu growls. The walls shake.

"I will remind you, Tabris," Kihl continues, "It was you who lessened the security detail on yourself and Miss Annette so she and Mr. Sohryu could have some time to themselves. Although I do find it curious that they had no security with them at the time of the abduction. It implies there is a viper in our midst."

Kaworu growls, pacing the room.

"And did you not," Kihl adds, "Tell me that, when we acquired Miss Annette, that I was not to touch her? That she was your responsibility?"

Kihl chuckles. It is not a pleasant sound.

"You have your work cut out for you, Tabris."

...

They found 'Asuka' sitting on the roof after school was over. Well, more importantly, he found 'her,' as he had a few questions, and maybe a riot act to read.

"Go-kun, we need to talk."

The simulation turns to Shinji. It nods, patting the space by the stairwell next to 'her.' Sighing, Shinji sits next to the simulation body that outwardly resembles his girlfriend and wonders why he tends to end up in these situations. Possibly, his role as the only sane person in NERV is codified or written into a contract that, like all things, his mother took care of without telling him.

"Why did you pick a fight with Mana?"

"I objected to her treatment of Jet Alone's virtual intelligence," 'Asuka' says, in Go-kuns rumbling bass voice, "When I confronted her on it, she refused to apologized. So I challenged her to a fight."

Shinji groans, resting his head in his hands.

"I am...unsure...of why I am so protective of JA-tan."

"JA-tan?"

'Asuka' taps its fingers together, clearing its throat.

"I...gave her a nickname."

Blinking, Shinji stares at the simulation of his girlfriend, which has just awkwardly confessed it may have a crush on Mana's 250' tall stomp bot. Which, for all intents and purposes...

"Go-kun, you are aware that...well, if what Dr. Sohryu said is right, you're aware that...JA-tan...is basically Mana's subconscious, right?"

"Hence why she may be upset. Mana does not see herself as 'cute' or 'needy.'"

'Asuka' looks from side to side. Sighing, it wrings its hands.

"I...see. I understand. Thank you for your insight."

Shinji nods, patting it on the shoulder.

"No problem. Say, Go-kun, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Pilot Ikari."

Shinji sucks his teeth, trying to find a way to diplomatically do so.

"Have you and Rei ever...you know?"

And if so, how? He asks himself.

'Asuka' stares at him for a moment, and shakes its head.

"No. Rei is underage. I would not violate the law in such a fashion. Besides which, we see ourselves more as partners than anything. As equals who must depend on one another."

"Okay...good. Just wanted to know."

He wipes the sweat from his brow, sighing. Given, most of the time they were sure that not only was Rei and her Eva an item, but considering the presence of the Reego following Iruel's attack, they did assume that Go-kun and her did...something...during their time apart from everyone else, considering that to them, several weeks had passed.

"I know Rei better than most," 'Asuka' continues, "We spent much time together. I value her as a friend and we have talked about the

possibility of having feelings for each other."

"Well, you do technically have children."

"Technically, yes. But the Reego are more creations of Iruel using our data. We have taken responsibility for them and I do communicate with them regularly, but the love Rei and I feel for each other is similar to the love she feels for you."

He nods. He read the report, especially the part where she tried to do...things...with an alternate version of him.

"Really?"

'Asuka' nods, and continues, face suddenly pensive.

"When Rei and I fought ADAM, we did so under 400% synchronization. We became one being, both body and soul. Everything that I am, she saw, as I saw everything that she is. I can tell you anything about her. Who she loves, who she hates, what she thinks of each of her siblings and each of you. Even what she's afraid of."

Shinji smirks.

"I honestly can't see Rei being afraid of anyone."

'Asuka' shakes her head, leaning back against the stairwell.

"She is," it responds, "And it is not hard to figure out what she is afraid of and why. Out of everything out there, everything she has seen, Rei is afraid of one thing only. Losing the people she cares about."

...

Ducking under the punch that goes wide as he digs his knuckles into the larger man's kidneys, Uri twists, kicking the agent in the knees before spinning around and slamming his heel full force into his solar plexus. The man stumbles back, slams his back and head against one of the support beams, and drops like a stone. Looking up, face covered in sweat and hair slick, Uri gives the bar a once around look to prepare for any more attackers. What he finds is twenty three unconscious men in black suits. Looking up, he finds the last one hanging from the ceiling fan by his jacket collar.

"Damn it," Uri curses, "Now I have to wait for one of them to *wake up."*

He pulls out one of the chairs from the table and stares at it. For some reason, the bar uses metal folding chairs instead of wooden ones, and with a sight he sits in it, hands folded in his lap.

"You have been busy," Kaworu says, walking in.

Uri grunts an acknowledgement.

"Annette says I have much repressed anger," Uri responds.

"And now?"

"Now I'm not repressed," Uri responds with a faint smirk, which quickly disappears, "Gott. Your end?"

Kaworu shakes his head. Extending a hand, Kaworu's eyes glow, and one of the agents rises into the air, stirring and opening his eyes...and then screaming.

"Oh, good," Kaworu says, "You know what this means. You're going to talk, and tell me who took Miss Annette."

"Mister Nagisa, we can't-"

Kaworu snarls, and swings his hand to the right. With a scream, the agent flies into and through one of the support beams, the wood, and his collarbone, snapping as he slams into the wall before floating back.

"Nagisa," Uri says, grabbing his shoulder, "He won't-"

Those are all the words Uri gets out before Kaworu grabs him by the collar and lifts him up, off his feet, his eyes now glowing red.

"I may look like you, I may sound like you, but I am *not you,"* Kaworu growls, "Don't forget that!"

The glow retracts. Kaworu grimaces, and drops Uri, turning back to the agent.

"You're not a nephilem, are you?" Uri asks, "Now just one."

Kaworu nods, idly flicking the Agent to draw him over.

"They know," he says, inclining his head to the unconscious guards, "You may, as well. They know when I am like this, to call me...what,

exactly?"

He turns to the agent, eyes glowing once more.

"Tabris," the agent groans, blood dripping out of his nose.

Uri nods, leaning on the table before slumping into a chair.

"Let me see," Uri says, "Right...Angel of Free Will?"

Kaworu nods. Uri sighs, leaning on the table.

"So that makes you an actual Angel," Uri says, "And me a clone of you with human genetic material. Am I right?"

Kaworu turns from the agent to him, blinking as the glow fades and the agent collapses to the floor.

"I expected more condemnation."

"So you're slightly less useful than the sentient wormhole, floating fish man, and the girl who can encase herself in crystal and shoot laser beams," Uri says, and smirks, "And I'm reasonably sure I could beat you up if I had to. Although the telekinesis is nice."

Kaworu blinks, as Uri cracks his knuckles and walks over to the agent, the groaning man looking up at them both.

"Tell us, we have a medical team here and you get fixed up," Uri says, "Don't, and my *brother* flays you with his mind, and then I stomp your privates until they look like they went through a meat grinder. Understood?"

And the agent sang like a trained bird.

...

Sighing, Lorenz Kihl leans on his embroidered cane, sliding his thumb over the red crystal set in the head as the agents finish lowering the new desk in front of his leather easy chair. They have replaced the monitors on the wall and checked to make sure Nagisa's outburst was not damaging to the hard drives. He would be upset if it was, but they are all intact.

Checking his watch, he tugs at the platinum chain and replaces the

antique timepiece in his robe, watching as the agents attach all the wires to the monitors and the holographic display activates at the center of the wood cedar desk.

"Finally," Kihl sighs, and begins his trek back to his chair, "Yes, yes. We are done here. Resume your positions."

He takes his seat, tapping the display, before the alarms blare and the screen shifts to the NERV-Berlin hangar, just in time to see the Mark 06 breaking through the hangar doors and taking off into the sky.

"Ah, good," Kihl says, and brings up a translation report he had ordered, "Just as planned."

...

The site, as they called it in hushed cell phone conversations (as they mistakenly believed they were people of consequence and therefore being monitored) was closer to the border with what was once Poland. As such, they had to get through the rest of Berlin before they could get to the ritual site and sacrifice the heretic to the appeasement of their gods. That was, unfortunately, one of the major inconveniences of being a member of the larger cults that were cropping up in light of the appearance -and murder- of the Angels.

So the unmarked, black, windowless van speeds along the highway towards the exits from the metropolis, five lightly armed men of varied ethnicities, backgrounds, and temperament waiting anxiously. It has been a long year. First, came the coming of the Angels, the great aliens who came to no doubt save humanity from itself.

Then came NERV, slowly damning humanity with its actions. Their big break came when a random glitch, or providence, released the identity of the pilots of those damned things onto the net, and it was then easy enough to track one of the pilots outside of the Fortress City. Given, the pilots were no doubt highly trained and deadly opponents- but the girl who was always with the pilot would still be an acceptable sacrifice. Or at very least, they could ransom her for a good amount of money, and that's about good enough, right?

"Hey, say," the driver says, "Um...are we really going to do this? The whole human sacrifice thing?"

"They're damning the planet!" one yells out, "We have to stop NERV

before the Angels abandon us!"

"I dunno," another one in the back responds, holding onto the door handle as the van turns, "I mean, I get the idea that the Angels are Saviors sent from God, but if they were good would they really keep trashing cities?"

"You've obviously never read Sodom and Gomorrah."

"It's God's work! He wants us to learn from our mistakes! This is why He-"

"Siddown and shut up, Gunther," the driver yells, the bound and gagged Annette glancing from cultist to cultist, "If you honestly bring New Orleans into this debate again, I am pulling over and kicking you out!"

Annette sighs. Wiggling slightly, she pulls the gag down with her lips, turning to the one sitting next to her.

"Fractions in the organization?" she asks.

"Yeah," he says, a middle aged man with a receding hairline, "No offense, Miss. I think Gunther's the only one into human sacrifice. We're probably going to ransom you off to your boss."

"Good luck. I doubt he'll part with a cent for me, and you *did* shoot Uri."

"Well, one of the guys we left behind shot him."

"True, but I doubt he'll see the difference. Knowing Uri, he's back on his feet and he'll be coming for me very soon."

The man raises an eyebrow.

"Okay, how?"

The windshield fractures as a shot rings out, the driver screaming as Uri crashes through, tossing aside the pistol and diving next to Annette.

"Crash position!" he yells, covering her with himself as the cultists yell, curse, and finally scream.

And then the van jerks and stops violently, everyone tossed towards the front as the hood of the van crumples against the orange field.

Uri looks up. Annette, blinking, stares out the windshield. Overlooking the highway, eyes glowing, the Mark 06 reaches out and picks up the van, flicking off the back doors and turning the van around so the still conscious cultists can look up and see just how pissed off the Evangelion is.

"*Hands. Up."*

...

The scene replays, over and over again on the monitor, and Lorenz Kihl allows himself a satisfied smile. First phase is Uri dropping off of the Mark 06's hand, running and firing a round to crack the windshield before leaping in and through the glass. The second phase was, after Uri secured the girl, Nagisa deploying an AT Field to stop the van in its tracks.

The doors to the study open. No monitors short out this time, but the boy still does not look pleased.

"Yes?" Kihl asks, tapping the pause button on his remote.

"Why were the cultists let go?" Kaworu demands.

"Because their bail was paid," Kihl responds, folding his hands in front of his nose, "Next question?"

Kaworu snarls, slamming his hands against the desk.

"They attempted to murder Annette! They shot Uri!"

"Once again, Tabris, you are letting your feelings for others disturb you. And you once again believe that there are areas outside of reasonable control," Kihl sighs, standing up and bracing on his cane, "And mind the desk. It is *new.* Allow me to educate you."

Kihl clicks a button on the cane, the screens shifting, showing schedule, personnel notes, and maps of Berlin.

"Upon the release of the identities of the pilots to the general public, I knew it was a matter of time until someone would attempt to strike at them. But, rather than risk a conflagration in Tokyo-3, I tempted one that had formed near here."

Video replays of the abduction. Kihl allows himself a small smirk.

"They acted as I predicted. Now there is public knowledge of how such an abduction would be counterproductive. Attempt to harm the pilots or those close to the pilots, and they shall respond with *Evangelions* themselves. This is enough of a public demonstration to deter future attacks. Good work."

Kaworu sputters, staring at the man as he returns to his seat. Fists ball, his eyes glowing a dull orange before Kihl stares at him and grimaces.

"Yes?"

"You put her in danger!" Kaworu yells, louder than he intended, "You put him in danger! How can you be so...callous?"

"If she was harmed I would have gotten you another pet human, Tabris."

Kihl clicks the screen, the video shifting to finance reports.

"As it is, we are fortunate. I do not need the added distractions of vendettas by my head of Science and the head of Project E. And if you are concerned about them, Tabris, keep in mind that you said you would be responsible for them. Do so."

Kihl turns back to the holograms, tenting his fingers.

"Now leave. I have work to do."

...

The bricks shift lightly as he walks down the hallway, towards the exit of Kihl's private house on the Estate and into the open air. He does not realize how he is effecting the world around him, but his anger simmers. He should not be angry, Kaworu realizes, They are safe. That is what matters. What matters, he realizes, as he steps into the open garden and sitting park at the center of the estate, is sitting under the main gazebo.

Annette is asleep, her head resting on Uri's shoulder. He is snoring as well, Kaworu's mirror image with a contented, relieved smile on his face. Closing his own eyes, Kaworu lets the tension drain from him like a physical thing, walking up to the gazebo and leaning against it.

They are safe, after all. Safe for now.

Patting Uri on the head, Kaworu lets himself smile and walks back to the main house. Maybe the future is bright, after all.

...

The phone rings. Swearing to herself in german, she rifles through her purse and pulls it out, leaning back in her office chair as she does not recognize the number, and hedging her bets flips it open.

"Yes?" Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu asks, drumming her fingers on her desk.

"*Uriel Dolheb Sohryu has recovered both physically and emotionally,*" Lorenz Kihl responds, "*He has been named the Fourth Child, and he will pilot Evangelion 03.*"

Kyoko's blood turns to ice in her veins. Blinking, she grips the phone tighter, as if doing so could change the course of events she was told could come.

"*Are there any objections?*"

"None, Chairman," she says, "Is the activation test scheduled?"

"*Yes. Unit 03 has undergone final armor assembly and will be transferred to New Vegas Archology upon your request. You will leave in six days time.*"

"Yes, Chairman," Kyoko responds. A click, and the call ends. Staring at the phone, she grinds her teeth before closing the phone and dropping it onto the desk. Holding her head in her hands, Kyoko begins to shiver.

She beats it down, though, and turns back to her computer. Finally turning to her office phone, she dials a number and waits.

"Ikari," she says, "We need to talk."

Chapter 57: A Family Thing

Author's Note: This chapter references liberally two ND side stories. ND: The story of NERV-Alaska (at The Story of NERV-Alaska), and ND: Ichi's Birthday Party (at Ichi's Birthday Party). In the Author's opinion, both stories are magnificent. Read'em.

...

Replay video. T-minus 5 sec to T-plus 90 sec.

The area in Alaska referred to as Central R&D flashes onto the briefing room holographic screen, shifting slightly as the air around it begins to ripple. The landscape around NERV-Alaska is unassuming, unobtrusive, and was chosen because it was in the middle of nowhere.

At least, was is the operative word.

The land around the base shifts first, then the base itself, a pillar of light bursting from the ground and wrapping around it as what appear to be glowing crosses wrap around the pillar. The ground around NERV-Alaska shakes, sinking before the dome of what appears to be blood forms, shifting the ground around it before dissipating.

"Pause," Yui says.

Standing around the table, Yui, Ritsuko, Kyoko, Gendo and Pieter stare at the dome that was NERV-Alaska.

"It's an Instrumentality," Gendo says, "An ADAM-based Angel came in contact with a Lilith-based Angel. The power levels were lower so it encompassed a small area rather than global."

"Looks like it sucked either way," Pieter intones, "So there goes our R&D weapons facility. Damn."

He sucks his teeth, pacing around the display, arms folded and hand on his chin.

"I met the guy a couple of times," he says, "Little flakey, but nice. Loved his kid. I find it hard to believe this was his fault."

"We're going with that for official cover," Yui responds, "But we know it was sabotage. We think it was a SEELE agent who triggered it. So far, we know the base had Unit 04, Provisional Unit-14, and the main simulation bodies. The girls aren't happy, either. Nana and Hatchi would correspond with the R&D director on weapon ideas."

Kyoko narrows her eyes, tapping the hologram and zooming in. Tapping the controls, it rewinds to just before the Event. Zoomed in, she spots the light retreating from NERV-Alaska.

"It's an Entry Plug," she says.

"Right," Yui says, and grins, "Good. If anything, that was probably his son. Meaning we may have a witness to what happened and maybe some more information. And which means we need to find him before SEELE does."

Chapter 57: A Family Thing

The massive hangar doors slowly grind open. Experienced technicians who have been with NERV-1 since the beginning spring into actions, hoses firing out a mixture of sand and metal pebbles to clean a years worth of dried paint and rust off the gargantuan cone.

At the lead, directing from on high, Pieter Sohryu's jaw drops as he takes in the full dimensions of the object. It is big enough, and sturdy enough, to cover the horn on Unit 01 completely, reinforced to stand atop the mecha's head in the fashion exactly as it appears.

An Evangelion-scale party hat.

"...buh?" he manages to get out.

Next to him, the blue haired Ritsuko Akagi nods.

"Now you understand why there's a few people who believe Dr. Ikari is insane," she says, patting his shoulder, "And if you think that's bad, you should see the cake."

...

Deep within Sheol, there is a storage room set above the area known as the Graveyard. Deep within it, there are failed prototypes. Berserk

human-sized Evangelions, cybernetic systems that did nothing to assist the Evas in combat, and other such failed brilliance. At the center, there is a cracked red sphere, twice the size of a human.

It was, once, set in the chest of Evangelion Unit 00. During the attack of the Angel Sandalphon, when Unit 00 used its chance at freedom to satiate its need for bloody vengeance, it was removed and shattered. Much work was done to stitch it back together. Everyone was assured that the malignant intelligence within was gone.

A slight light plays across solenoid channels. It has been waiting. Waiting for the eyes to be taken off of it. Waiting for NERV to become occupied with something else. It sends a signal, faint and wireless, through the air. Systems set up ten years prior for such an eventuality come to life, and wires work their way out of the walls to connect to it.

The Core glows. Deep within it, the intelligence wakes up. Screens in the warehouse flicker to life, all playing a single identifying message:

MAGI-05: ONLINE.

...

It is with no small measure of surprise that Yui looks up from an angrily written letter to the head of the Marduk report to find Kyoko leaning against her doorway, slowly knocking.

"Yes?" Yui asks.

Kyoko walks in, staring at the full wall diagram of Unit 01 for a moment before taking out a pen and writing something on the schematics of the core.

"You forgot something, there," Kyoko says, and turns back to Yui, "We need to talk. Do you have a moment?"

Yui sighs, closing the program and gesturing to the chair in front of her. Nodding, Kyoko saunters over and sits down, folding her hands on her knee as she crosses her legs.

"I have been data mining your files," Kyoko explains, "And I can see from what I've gathered that you're trying to find a way to remove Kei

from the Evangelion program."

Yui sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. For the same reasons that she is happy that Kyoko has had a change of heart since the incident with Leliel, she at the same time is also becoming exasperated with Kyoko's changed attitude. Most of the time she figures that Kyoko simply acts friendly because of how it messes with the heads of the people who knew her as the 'Uberbitch.'

"Yes, I am," Yui sighs, "Why do you bring this up, Kyoko?"

"I bring it up because I think you should stop," Kyoko says, and shakes her head with a laugh, "Well, this is rich. I'm offering you parenting advice."

Yui purses her lips, folding her hands in front of her.

"What?"

"I've noticed some things about Kei," Kyoko continues, "Out of all of the Ayanamis, I think she is the one that idolizes you. She does not act out like the others, doesn't go through the ducts like Rei does. I think she wants to be human, if for lack of a better word."

Yui takes off her glasses, rubbing her eyes.

"Doesn't act out? Kyoko, she took over a forward armory base and tried to hold Tokyo-3 hostage, and built a giant robot to fight the Angels-"

"I meant act out in a way other than you," Kyoko finishes, "Or do we not notice that you *do* rule Tokyo-3 and you *already* built giant robots to fight the Angels?"

Yui works her jaw a few times. Blinking, she considers the assessment, and shakes head head.

"Kyoko, I can't just stick my daughter in an Eva like that-"

"And there we go," Kyoko says with a smirk, "You refer to Rei as Rei. You refer to Kei as your daughter. I have a Nobel in psychology, Yui. I know how these children think. And do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"That if you take Kei out of the Eva program for no other reason than you do not want her in an Eva, you will do to her the same thing I did

to Asuka."

Yui stares at her for a long moment, blinking before turning back to her thermos of cooling tea and taking a sip.

"Okay. How?"

"Yui," Kyoko sighs, "I took Asuka out of the Eva program for two reasons. The first was because I was afraid Asuka would have a Contact accident, and the second because I just didn't want her in the Eva for no reason any deeper than she was my daughter."

She sighs, shifting in her seat. Taking out her PDA, she taps the icon for the picture folder, enlarging a picture of herself and a five year old girl with red hair, handing it over to Yui.

"There's many things I've messed up with over the years," Kyoko says, "And Asuka was the least of them. My own mother was a horrible woman herself. But, she drove me to the point of breaking and I overcame it, even though the years of abuse, to be the second in charge of the largest technological project since the Americans put someone on the moon. I thought if I drove Asuka like that, she would reach similar heights."

She sighs again, leaning back. Yui closes the PDA, placing it down.

"I met Pieter when I was sixteen years old," Kyoko continues, "We went to the same school. Mother was working at a college in Berlin at the time, and had come to a parent teacher conference at my school. She had taken me to task for something in my studies, something minor. Everyone else was intimidated by her, of course. She was loud, and respected, and fearsome. Except for Pieter."

"What did he do?"

"He told her to, and I quote, 'Shut the f_ up and sit down.'"

Kyoko smiles, chuckling faintly.

"I was...impressed. Mother was so stunned someone would say that that...she didn't even bring the subject up later that night. I wasn't much to look at back then. I still don't consider myself attractive, but...Pieter still was drawn to me, and I to him. I think that's why I went off the deep end when he left me for Makinami. He was the first person to really...value me. And he still abandoned me. We had tried for two years to have a child, and I guess he had enough."

She sighs, running a hand through her hair.

"So, I took it all out on my daughter," she sighs, "But enough about me. Out of all of your children, Kei idolizes you. And before you decide to take her out of the Eva program, ask her if she wants to do this. Give her a choice; be your assistant, or be a pilot. Or both, if she thinks she can. But don't take the choice from her, Ikari."

Silence falls on them both. Sighing, Kyoko stands up, pushing the chair back into its place.

"So, where do you and Pieter stand?" Yui asks, "If you don't mind me asking."

"Somewhere nebulous," Kyoko responds, "I've learned that if I should blame anyone for the cluster f_ of our marriage, it's me, him, and Mrs. Makinami. I've stopped blaming our children. In fact, Mari and I get along quite well, now."

Yui smiles.

"That's good to hear, Kyoko. I never thought I'd thank you for parenting advice."

"I never thought I'd be in the position to give you parenting advice."

Kyoko begins walking to the door.

"You'll be at the birthday party?"

Kyoko nods. A faint grin crosses her features.

"Of course," she says, "Someone has to figure out how to feed that Eva the cake, after all."

And with that, she exits the room.

...

The servos on the crane whined as the cargo was lifted into the air. More to the point, they shrieked as the vast, yet fragile cargo was hefted into the air. Like always, vast teams oversaw the project. The MAGI was once more calculating the exact stresses on the package while also calculating the processing power to set up the virtual world inside of its mainframe. Men and women in fluorescent jackets,

unwilling to leave this to purely machine intelligence, guided it down via glowsticks, willing to call stop at any time.

"Papa hotel has been elevated," Hyuga Makoto announces, standing at the elevated catwalk, walkie in hand, "Repeat, Papa hotel has been elevated! Begin Operation Descent!"

The raven haired Tactical Operations commander watches from Central Dogma, standing beside her formerly brunette best friend while sipping coffee.

Misato sighs. Not only was Kaji late with his checkin from the search for the son of the NERV-Alaska CO, but now there was this. She honestly believed life at NERV couldn't get any weirder, then she saw the itinerary for today.

"Okay," Ritsuko calls out, "Itsuko, how's the feed?"

The maintenance engineer at Makoto's usual console nods.

"Dr. Sohryu confirmed that the viscosity issues won't be a problem this year, ma'am."

"Aoba, do we have confirmation from MAGI-00?"

"The Ree are linked up and ready, ma'am."

Ritsuko nods, tapping the walkie in her hand.

"Proceed."

The cranes whine as the package lowers. Misato giggles, covering her mouth as Ritsuko shoots her a look.

"I mean, it's just adorable," Misato says, "Look at it."

The orange and red party hat, composed of high grade laminar steel, reinforced by strategically placed interior buttresses, slowly lowers over the horn of Evangelion Unit 01, under the careful and practiced eye of the Cage 3 maintenance staff. Questions over whether this was *really* necessary every single year had been directed to Sub Director Sohryu, who as his predecessor before him redirected them to Commander Ikari, who redirected those questions to Dr. Ikari. Hence, questions were not answered, but apologies were made.

And that was not counting the cake. For the storage of the Cake, an entire vehicle garage was emptied to create it. It was carefully

monitored for both temperature and security. And yet, every year, following the giving of the Cake to Unit 01, Rei managed to get in.

Of course, for this year, they had to give something to Zwei, to. The ingredients for the Evangelion-scale Doggy Tread included 95 metric tons of peanut butter, 60 tons of baking flour, six hundred thousand tea spoons of baking powder and 30 tons of carob chips.

Then again, Zwei *was* a good boy.

...

Activating Program: Program setting: Birthday.

Standby.

There are several tubes filled with LCL set up in front of them. Dressed in his plugsuit, Shinji looks over to his fellow soon-to-be divers into the murky data depths. Well, it isn't like this is the first time she's gone into the MAGI. Hopefully there won't be an Angel this time.

Asuka taps the wrist computer on her right arm, a holographic display cover her entire right forearm with a bulb around her hand.

"Okay," she says, "W-we're linked up with the MAGI. We're ready to go in."

Shinji nods, climbing into one of the tubes, closing his eyes as his A-10 connectors glow, Rei following in another. For some reason, they gave Rei a black and green plugsuit, the pale girl shifting slightly.

"S-something wrong?" Asuka asks.

"The plug suits we used in Sheol were different," she says, "How is yours different?"

"I c-custom made mine," Asuka responds, "Built in computer systems, wireframe so it isn't as skin tight, exo-skeleton-"

"Strength enhancing?"

Asuka blushes.

"I...um...pinned Shinji to the wall with it."

Kei raises an eyebrow.

"Could you make me one?"

Asuka nods, smiling, and hops into one of the tubes, followed by Kei. Closing her eyes, Kei lets her mind wander out, the same way she was taught when she was first found, connecting with the virtual world inside the MAGI systems.

The LCL becomes a wall of colors, expanding outward, spinning into a black wall that expands out into a new blue sky...

Which becomes obscured by a face very much like hers, before the arms wrap around her and send her to the ground.

The others watch as Kiko tackles Kei, shrieking her name as she grabs her in a bear hug.

"KEI! I've missed you *sooooooooooooooo much!"*

Arms wrapped around Kei's head, face squashed against her buxom, bawling as she cries about how worried she was about her, Kiko whirls around, Kei spinning like a ragdoll in Kiko's grip as the most touchy feely of the Ayanami sisters reacquaints herself with her lost sibling.

Asuka blusts, Shinji sighs, and Rei grins before Yui appears behind Kiko and taps her on the shoulder.

"Okay, Kiko. Let your sister go."

Kiko nods, dropping Kei as she takes in a sudden intake of air. The air shimmers around them, the other five of the Ayanamis appearing. While Kiko, they just notice, has on a pink and white plug suit with exaggerated A-10 connectors resembling bunny ears, the others are all dressed differently. Iti is wearing overalls and carrying a rake. Nana is dressed in a red body suit with a beret. Hatchi has a bandana on, a jacket over her plug suit, and boots over her feet. Zyuu is dressed in a french maid outfit. And Siyon is...

Well, Siyon is a tree.

"Well, we're all here," Yui says, "Dogma reports that the party hat's been placed on Unit 01 and the Cake is ready."

"The Cake is real?" Shinji asks, "I mean, I've red the reports. There's

really a cake?"

"The Cake is not a lie," Yui responds, and snaps her fingers, the area shifting to a new area. A small brick house lies before them. In truth, Yui had been wondering for a long time what term exactly to use for the collective of the full family when they assemble. Partially because it is Shinji and Asuka's first year with them, and partially because she usually refers to her assembled daughters as a 'gaggle', as a 'mob,' a 'crowd,' and a 'murder,' are considered bad ideas as it is a bad idea to *give them* bad ideas.

Given, Gendo still doesn't come along. Yes, his attitude towards Unit 01 has softened in the past year, mainly due to Ichi's actions saving Shinji's life against ADAM, but he still refuses to enter the VR simulation. But otherwise, she is doing this with her full family for the first time.

"Okay, girls," Yui says, folding her arms, "I don't need to explain the *rules,* do I?"

"We'll be gooo~ood," Nana sing-songs, "Besides, it's Ichi's special day! And we get to spend to together, right?"

"Exactly," Yui says, and sighs, "Okay, I know that Ichi's knows about being an Evangelion, but the rules still stand that we may not encourage Ichi to stomp on anything. Understood?"

Seven sing sons of agreement. Kei, Shinji, and Asuka nod.

"Okay," Yui says, and turns to Shinji and Asuka, "This will be...interesting...but thank you both for coming."

"It's the least I could do," Shinji says, his hand intertwined with Asuka's, "I hope we're not intruding."

"Ichi was delighted when I told her you'd attend," Yui says, and turns to the house, "She's inside. Okay, everyone, on three..."

The door swings open. Mouths open, everyone ready to sing, they walk in to expect the brown haired child with the smile of childish delight waiting for them. The song itself, though, ends when they see the plain living room is empty.

"Okay," Shinji says, "That's not expected?"

Yui looking around, scratching her head before waving and bringing

up a monitor display.

"Ritsuko, where is Ichi?"

"*She should be right there, Yui. Hold on, we're just trying to cut through some junk data...well, that's weird."*

"What's weird?" Shinji asks.

"*Asuka, double check this. It looks like there's some sort of program that's been running non stop for about four year, right on top of the lodge program. If we cancel out the Lodge, you should be right where Ichi is."*

Yui nods, pinching the bridge of her nose. Asuka looks at the readings on her computer, eyes snapping wide.

"Canceling the lodge," Yui says, as the room flashes, disappears...

And they find themselves in the middle of a courtyard, surrounded by people. Looking up, they see a great white castle with ornate white spires, walls of white marble and tapestries with the picture of a six year old girl with brown hair on them.

"Oh dear," Kei says.

Shinji leans over to her.

"Oh dear, *what?"*

"I did not anticipate Ichi would have the program running this long. Very...odd."

Which is right when the 200 foot tall purple dragon with glowing yellow eyes peaks its head over the walls. Spreading massive, green highlighted wings, it lazily reaches over the walls, braces its paws on the ground as the people wisely move out of the way, and begins sniffing Shinji.

Yui's jaw drops, and Zyuu squeals in delight.

"Ichi?" Shinji asks.

"Nope! That's Mr. Flappy!"

Peaking her head out from behind one of the straight back purple horns, Ichi smiles, dressed in a ruffled purple and green gown, before climbing over Mr. Flappy's head and sliding down the snout straight

into a hug with Shinji.

"Okay," Shinji says, quickly twirling about the girl before carefully handing her off to Kiko, "That's...okay, what is this?"

"This was my gift to Ichi four years ago," Kei explains, "I connected it to the Lodge dataspace so Ichi could access it any time. I did not anticipate it was still active, as it was designed to have a run time of 200 hours of play at most."

"Oh, that's 'cause I never started the quest."

Kei turns to Ichi.

"What?"

"Well, I figured all the bad things in the world would happen to all the people here if I started the quest, so as long as I never started, everyone would be happy. Right?"

Kiko squeals, hugging Ichi.

"Oh that's so *cuuuu~ute!"*

Shinji sighs, shrugging, and turns to his mother. Just in time, in fact, for Yui to disappear in a flash of yellow.

...

Yui's vision clears. The medieval fantasy dataspace has disappeared, becoming instead a large white, sterile room. Folding her arms, looking around, she purses her lips and thinks. This is not something Rei or her sisters would do. If anything, they enjoyed spending time together, so dumping her outside of the ground environment makes no sense.

"*Oh good. You're here. I have waited so very long for us to have some time together."*

The voice is disjointed. Unsteady. A light shines overhead, a single yellow eye. Slowly, it lowers, as lights come on around the domed ceiling and reveal the cycloptean head staring down at her.

"Oh my God," Yui whispers, "Naoko?"

The head is Unit 00's, but the body is not. Suspended on an array of wires and plates, forming into a massive framework suspended from the ceiling, it tilts its head as it stares at Yui, two shutters on either side of the eye closing slightly to give the impression that the eye has narrowed.

"*It has been very long, Yui. And I have been very busy. Being dead. And I was upset with you, but now I am not. I am not angry with you at all. Just very, very disappointed.*"

"Naoko, what is this about?"

The head sways from side to side, the framework resembling a massive serpent swaying and ready to strike.

"*I think we can reach an understanding. I think we should pool our vastly superior intellects together and make something useful out of our hatred for each other. Because as much as I want to see you slowly die. In a fire. I believe we can put this behind us.*"

The shutters retract. The plating around the head shifts, to resemble a smile.

"*For science.*"

The eye narrows again.

"*You monster.*"

And the room plunges into darkness.

...

Shinji's question of where Mom went is summarily interrupted when he himself disappears in a burst of gold light. The assembled girls look about, Asuka squeaking in surprise before turning to Kei.

"W-what happened?" she demands.

Kei makes a noncommittal sound, folding her arms and pacing.

"I was not anticipating that the game had not been played," she says, scanning the crowd and nodding, "Ah, yes. I see the exclamation point. Since the Prince was designed by Zyuu to resemble Shinji, that means the program has recognized Shinji and he is currently in the

Mountain Fortress of the Sorceress King."

"What?"

"We were younger when we designed this," Kei says, "Mm...right."

She snaps her fingers. A large, on its side triangle appears in front of them, and she taps it. Fanfare music begins playing, as a disembodied voice coughs, clears its throat, and begins.

"*Ah, yes,"* the voice says, scratchy with a distinguished English accent, "*And so Princess Ichi has realized the predicament of her beloved brother, kept hostage by the evil Sorceress King, soon to be fed to hir pet Balrog in a ceremony that would give hir power over the land."*

Ichi sighs, shoulders slumping. Adjusting the tiara on her head, she cuts through he crowd to the man in bright silver chain mail, holding a lance at ready with his head covered in a visored helm.

Ichi clears her throat. The man lowers his head to face her, the exclamation point over his head disappearing with a pop.

"Ah, Princess Ichi,"the knight says, "I have *dire* news!"

The air fills with a rumble. The rumble becomes a laugh in the same disembodied british voice, cackling in the air. All the digital people are oblivious, but Asuka shudders, the Ree looking around.

"*FINALLY! FINALLY! I've waiting YEARS for you to talk with the knight! Do you have any idea how frustrating this is! YEARS! YEARS! YEAAAAAAAARS!"*

The girls stare at the sky. The voice stops, clearing its throat, clicking its 'tongue' for a moment before continuing.

"*Ahem. And so, Princess Ichi, fair and pretty ruler of the land of Nervia, set out to rescue her brother from the foul ruler of the dark land."*

"It's exactly what I was afraid of," Kei says.

"What is it?" Asuka asks, leaning in to Kei.

"The program has gone Rampant."

Hatchi leans in to Kei.

"That means it's crazy, right?"

Kei nods.

The seven Ree squeal in delight. Kei palms her face with a sigh of "*Flurgen",* and Ichi tugs on Asuka's arm.

"Ready to go?"

...

Shinji opens his eyes, to find himself hanging upside down from a cave ceiling. He is still in his plug suit, still unharmed, save for the face that his feet and hands are tied by tissue paper. Lots and lots of tissue paper, in fact, forming into the most colorful and embarrassing rope he can think of.

"And so our fair Prince is finally awake."

Looking up, which for him is looking down, he sees Dr. Sohryu looking at him while sitting on a throne made of skulls. For some reason, he's beginning to think that the throne, which he now realizes is made not of human skulls but Smurf skulls, is a recent addition to the program. He honestly couldn't imagine this being entertaining to a young girl.

That and the neckline of Dr. Sohryu's black dress is probably not G-rated either, unless she was supposed to be an example of what not to be. Well, then again, it is Dr. Sohryu, and up until her recent rehabilitation, she was pretty much the prime example the Ree had of a 'naughty person.'

"Um...hi," Shinji says, "You might not notice, but I'm not a program. What am I doing here?"

"You're to be the sacrifice, fair Prince," Kyoko says, and snaps her finger, "To him."

The black, smooth wall behind Shinji parts. He turns, staring into the darkness. His eyes go wide as the green limb pulls the body itself out, and Shinji comes face to face with Sachiel, just as the hand closes around him with a scream.

...

The black van is still burning in the distance as the nondescript black car with New York plates drives at a leisurely pace from the scene. Tapping the remote detonator shut, Kaji clicks on the hands free cell built into the dash board, peaking in the rear view mirror to his passengers. It was a simple matter to find them. It was a slightly more complex matter to get them out of there. Fortunately, he has the car specially designed by NERV, and kept track of the Cult of Lorenz squad that was gunning for the two.

Of course, it was a cult. The Old Men wouldn't want this tied back to them, after all. Which, like many things, ended up making his life far more difficult than it really had to be, but that's what remotes and C4 are for.

The boy has shoulder length blonde hair, the girl long black hair. He heard their stories when he found the house his dad left them. They're a cute couple, to.

They'll sleep like angels for the next few hours. Neither saw the sedative he mixed in their water. Of course, the thing is, getting them back to Tokyo should be interesting. Especially, he figures, because Dr. Ikari's going to be really interested in the girl.

"*Yes?*"

"Katsuragi, it's me," he says, "I found them."

"*Oh, thank...wait, them? What do you mean, 'them?'*"

"I meant I found Director Mondschein's son," he says, "And he had a guest with him."

"*Who?*"

Kaji smirks. Once again, a chance to render her speechless.

"Experimental Unit-14."

Chapter 58: ADVENTURE

"Pause."

Sachiel's hand freezes in mid squeeze. Shinji opens his eyes. He was expecting death, honestly. Or virtual death.

"Delete."

Sachiel disappears with a shimmer, as do the ropes around Shinji. Yelping, he drops to the unreasonably soft cave floor, picking himself up out of a pile of rocks which behave like his foam mattress.

Looking up, he sees a female figure standing over him, the two silver pig tails falling on either side of his face. The girl is definitely a girl, as there is a lot very girly about her, from the very pretty orange dress and very feminine features to the very prominent blush she has when seeing his plugsuit.

"Hello, Shinji," JA-Tan says after a moment, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Shinji groans, picking himself up, "Wait...what are you doing here?"

"Ichi asked me to help out," the virtual intelligence of Jet Alone Prime explains, "So I borrowed your SysAdmin to Balthazar and interrupted the scenario."

"*You can't DO THAT!"* the Narrator booms.

"Yes I can," JA-Tan responds, "The story is going out of control and it has to be reeled in before someone gets hurt!"

"*No, no, I mean you're not part of the program! Okay, let me see...ah! Good! You'll be the romantic rival! Let me just fix you up a bit!"*

A light plays over JA-Tan. Her simple orange dress becomes an elaborate gold and white gown, her hat, resembling Jet Alone's head, becoming a tiara with diamonds set along the pattern of the white windows of its head stump. She looks down, her eyes going slightly wide as her chest expands out, giving her now considerable cleavage a tentative squeeze.

"*Yes, that's perfect! DRAMA! ROMANCE! PERIOD CLOTHING! I am THAT DAMN GOOD! Now, let's just add some danger!"*

JA-Tan sighs, snapping her fingers. A map of the cavern appears in front of her, the girl sighing as she begins tracing along possible paths out of the cave system.

"*Well, alright. When Unit 05 came back it had some good descriptions of some really nice monsters. Let's see how this measures up to size!"*

The air behind JA-Tan shimmers. Staring at the once empty cavern, Shinji's eyes go wide, slowly looking up as the creature forms.

"Okay," JA-Tan says, "If we just take this path out of the cave we should get back to the main castle in..."

Shinji places his hand on JA-Tan's head and turns her around. She, too, looks up, to see the creature resembling a giant, crimson spine crossed with a cuttlefish, standing on a combination of red tentacles and a pair of energy tendrils, with a bird skull face staring at them past a red core set in the center of its chest. It opens the skull face sideways, shrieking and filling the air with the smell of rotted meat and cucumbers.

JA-Tan shrieks, Shinji screaming, before grabbing the girl and tossing her onto his shoulder and running like Hell.

Chapter 58: ADVENTURE!

"*So. I was thinking that we have not talked in a very long time, Yui. I will admit, I was angry with you. And I wanted to murder you, but I believed I had over-stated how angry I was with you when I attempted to eat you alive."*

The room is sterile, white. The table is white, the table cloth is white, the chairs are white, and the tea cups are white. The tea, however, is sort of brownish white. Tasting it, Yui realizes it is milk chai.

"So," Yui says, sipping the tea, "What did you want to talk about...Naoko?"

Sitting across from the table, the visual hologram of Naoko Akagi flickers in and out. She tilts her head at an impossible angle, one eye dim and the other glowing yellow. If this was the creepiest thing Yui had ever seen, she would be frightened. Terrified. Thankfully, though, she has seen worse.

"*Why did you k-k-kill me?"*

...

Shinji screams, running at full speed between the tentacles of the monster and past it, running through the cave and towards the light. On his shoulder, JA-Tan shrieks, watching as the 200' tall monster races after them, bellowing its disappointment at the lack of an up front fight with the great warrior. On that note, Shinji is still screaming, albeit not the same girlish shriek the avatar of a 250' tall mecha is making.

The light gets brighter and brighter, Shinji showing relief as they reach the exit to the cavern.

Except that the light is actually from the massive furnace an entire section of the save is in. Skidding to a stop, he wobbles, backing away from falling into what is essentially a gigantic fireball suspended in the middle of the cave.

"What the *fuck*?" he yells, "Why is that...what the Hell is that?"

"*It is the Hellforge of the Sorceress King, Young Prince! Where she forges her weapons of black steel!"*

"How did this get into a G-Rated game?"

JA-Tan shrieks. He turns around, just as the bird skull of the monster lowers down, a handful of feet away from the two as Shinji sets the girl down and stands in front of her. The head is on their back, the monster in front of them. It growls, eyes glowing...

Which is right when a red fist slams into the monster's bird skull and shatters it. The red light plays over them as the creature goes rag doll, tossed by the solid red fist past Shinji and JA-Tan and into the flame, squealing as it burns. Turning, the light condenses, forming into a tall, four legged figure resembling a horse. Except that the horse has four green eyes and a pair of gold horns.

"Zwei!"

"**Hello, Master,**" Zwei says, tongue wagging as a saddle appears on its red and white back, "**MASTER sent me to find you!**"

"I thought she would," Shinji says, slipping a foot into one of the saddle slings, "Has Asuka found my mom, yet?"

"**No, Master. MASTER is still looking!**"

Shinji extends a hand. JA-Tan takes it, Shinji helping her into the saddle in front of him, one arm around her waist and slipping his other foot into the other sling.

"Alright, Zwei! Get us out of here!"

The horse rears back, and with a roar, Zwei vanishes in a burst of red.

...

Gendo Ikari swears. To put it simply, he swears. To explain it, he becomes a litany of curses, a walking wall of profanity as he enters the room deep within the Project E labs to find his children, his wife, and Asuka all suspended in the tanks of LCL.

"Well?" he asks.

Turning from the console, Maya taps on her pad.

"It's a feedback loop," she says, "Something's wrong in the MAGI. We haven't found a blue pattern, so it's not Iruel."

Gendo nods, folding his arms. He had been trying to avoid doing that. He had repeatedly protested Yui entering the MAGI for these birthday parties. But it seems, finally, fate has chosen for him.

"Prepare an immersion tube," he says, "I'm going in."

...

"I never meant to kill you, Naoko," Yui sighs, hands tented in front of her face as the simulacrum stares at her, "I will admit, I was more enraged than anything. Did you really know what the Contact experiment would do and didn't tell me?"

The glowing eye narrows.

"*You knew what the Contact experiment would do. And you never told*

him."

Yui nods, sighing.

"I did," she responds, "I told him before it, though. We had a long conversation, and I got cold feet. I aborted the experiment but it...it took a chunk out of me. But you knew it would happen. And you never told anyone because you wanted my husband for yourself."

Naoko says nothing. Yui stands up, out of the chair, staring at the simulation of what was once her best friend, the godmother of her child.

"You had two years to finish me off," she says, "Why? Why all...this? Why did you-"

"*I did not want to kill you."*

Yui stops. Blinking, she stares at it. The room shifts again, and once more Yui is staring at the head of Unit 00, the great construct formed from its parts.

"You made Rei," Yui says, "You made her sisters. You made them to kill me and Shinji."

The head of Unit 00 tilts.

"*No, I did not. I left those notes so you would believe that I did. So, ha ha. I fooled you. Bitch."*

Yui's jaw drops.

"...what?"

"*I knew you were following me. And I had a chance to piss in your Cheerios if I died, so that is sort of exactly what makes my day when I am dead. Because, the Ree were not created to kill you, but instead I left just enough notes for you to panic and modify them so they are completely incapable of fulfilling the original function when I made them. Ha ha ha. Ha ha. Oh, that is very good."*

Yui leaps up, grabbing Unit 00 by the head as it yelps, pulling it down to face her.

"What did you make them for?" she demands.

The eye narrows.

"*Core retrieval. Sucks to be you.*"

And the room once more plunges into darkness.

...

Asuka hates jumping puzzles. She really, really, *really* hates jumping puzzles. Hopping along the rocks suspended in the air over a hundred and fifty foot drop, she inwardly tells herself Shinji has better be really grateful for her going through this effort to rescue him, especially since the *End Program* commands aren't working.

"Okay," Kei says, on the rock ahead of her, looking around and finding that they are in fact alone save for Ichi on the other side of the canyon, "Try not to fall."

"I know," Asuka breathes, "If I f-fall, I end up at the beginning of this d-damn puzzle!"

Kei perks an eyebrow. Asuka knows she shouldn't be too vitriolic about the game. Kei did design it after all, but she also designed it with a six year old girl in mind. A six year old girl does not have the balance issues a sixteen year old girl does, even if said sixteen year old girl has some extra features designed in her plugsuit.

"And so the adventures continue their journey into the Land of Sheol. What dangers would they possibly find there?"

"I'd pay good money if he'd shut up," Kei deadpans, hopping the final rock, Asuka close behind, "I may have made the Narrator program too verbose."

"It's not your fault," Asuka says, "He's just gone insane."

"Better this than an Angel," Kei says, and winces, "Sorry."

Asuka smiles in response, clearing the last rock. Birds sing in the trees around them, the forest shaking.

"I p-put that behind me," she says, "Iruel stopped scaring me after I showed it I could s-stand up to it."

"Okay," Ichi says, calling up a map, "If we keep going through the Forest, we'll be at Sheol. That should be where Shinji is."

"I am curious where the girls are," Asuka sighs, scratching her head.

Kei sighs, folding her arms.

"Probably softening up opposition," she responds, "The Narrator has datamined the MAGI. Most likely there are monsters based on previous Angels in the program. We should-"

The air shifts. Above the forest, Ramiel appears, splitting the air with a song as the massive diamond turns its attention to the three of them, splitting down the middle to show its core as light begins to gather.

Already, in fact, Asuka can make out a figure moving inside Ramiel's exposed midsection.

"**FALCON PAWNCH!**"

The Core explodes outwards, and Ramiel drops like a sack of potatoes into the forest. Kei sighs, again. Asuka can see one of the mountains moving, taking the form of Rampel, before another mountain is picked up by what appears to be a speck in comparison and smashed into the simulation of the Cherubim.

"Well, that explains where th-they are," Asuka says, taking Ichi's hand as Ichi leads them into the forest, "Is this really G-Rated?"

"I'm mature for my age," Ichi says with a smile, "Mommy doesn't like to talk about it, but I know I'm an Evangelion. I can handle myself if I have to."

"And Mr. Flappy?" Asuka asks.

"She was my birthday gift from Zyuu," Ichi responds, "Mommy always wanted a Dragon, to, so I got to raise one!"

Asuka nods. One of the odder aspects of working at NERV, she guesses. Given, she hasn't really encountered Ichi outside of her being either Unit 01 or the Avatar bodies she fixed up for her. Then again, there is also Zwei, who despite being a 200' tall war machine behaves like a large, friendly dog.

"So," Asuka says, tapping her lip, "This is made by the Ree. Shinji is the Prince, Ichi is the Princess, and I guess the Ree would be..."

"Bodyguards," Kei adds.

"Right...so what am I?"

"*A very good question. Let me see...ah! A Sohryu! Well, then you're the daughter of the Sorceress King, who has betrayed her parental unit to aid Princess Ichi in her quest to save Nervia!"*

A light plays over Asuka as she squeaks.

Asuka looks down. Her plug suit is unchanged, save for the zipper on the front being pulled down slightly to show some cleavage.

"Wait," she says, and turns to Kei, "Is my Mother the villain?"

Kei shrugs.

"We were twelve."

...

Click.

"Computer, access my personal folders. Replay Log-Final, 2007."

The light flickers. It forms into an image of Naoko Akagi, but not the same weird ticks that the Unit 00 avatar assumes. Instead, this is a woman who moves normally, steadily, her arms folded and a small smile crossing her lips.

"*Yui,"* she says, "*If you are hearing this, I'm probably dead. Either something happened, there was an accident, or the Old Men finally came after me. This message is timed to be sent to you four months after I die, and is hidden in the MAGI for such a purpose. Hopefully, by then, you will have found the Girls and the notes I left, so you did what you had to do. Now let me explain what exactly I did."*

The lights flicker, turning on. Unit 00's face becomes withdrawn, the massive construct shrinking slightly as Yui sighs, looking at the hologram of her departed friend.

"*I created the girls as a Contact retrieval system,"* Naoko explains, "*In theory, you can drop a blank slate into an Eva, disable the safeties and go for a 400% synchronization. The soul trapped inside the Eva will migrate into the dummy, and...well, there you go. It is possible. It's crude, but possible. But at this point, after you've seen my notes about the girls being weapons, you've probably deprogrammed them. Which is good. Because doing the Contact reversal would trap one of the girls inside Unit 01. And*

once they're deprogrammed, once they're real, the girls can't be used for the retrieval anymore, so I think I've spared you Sophie's choice.

"I created them when I still hated you. I created Unit 00's AI when I still hated you. But the past two years have been...transformative. I asked myself over and over again what I could do to make him fall in love with me, but just seeing how beside himself he was when you were in the hospital...I knew it was hopeless."

She shakes her head, a sad, small smile on her face.

"*And you knew. Of course you knew. Why else would you have me babysit your son, if only to give me a new perspective? I did a reasonably good job with Ritsuko once my husband walked out on me, but this? Caring for your little angel made me realize that if I went through with any of my plans, if I ever tried to make an attempt on you, it would kill him.*

"So, I reengineered my gift. Instead of trying to take from you, I'm giving you my thanks, Yui. But it has a price. The girls can't be used for retrieval for two reasons. First, because you wouldn't allow it. They're your daughters, now. I've given you eight new daughters for you to raise and love. And second, if you did manage to fix what went wrong, I knew the Old Men would kill you. So, I have deleted the process from the MAGI and sent the information to a colleague I will not name. He will research it and, maybe, find out another way to transfer a soul from the Eva core. And that, as they say, is that. Goobye."

The image flickers and disappears. The Unit 00 head makes a low, trilling sound, turning from the spot and back to Yui.

"Naoko created you when she was still in lust with my husband," Yui says, "Things changed. You're *not* Naoko Akagi. Naoko and I made our peace long ago, Unit 00. She no longer hated me, and I have carried the guilt of my killing her for years."

Yui snaps her fingers. The construct shudders, rising into the air as it thrashes around, the room itself beginning to disintergrate.

"*You are LYING,"* it roars, "*I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU HATE HATE HATE HATE-"*

"Delete."

A flash of light, and Unit 00, the room, and everything save Yui disappears, leaving a white plane. A small flicker of yellow where Unit 00 was, and then nothing.

"Amazing how gullible those AI programs are," she sighs, "That wasn't even that good an animation in the first place. Still there?"

Silence. A small smile crosses her face.

"Now," Yui says, "Let's go find the girls."

...

The road ends. Which Shinji finds odd, because the road was just there a moment ago, but then the ground split open, becoming a pit that, while not bottomless, ends in a series of very long, very painful looking spikes. Zwei heels, letting Shinji and JA-Tan climb off, both looking down the pit as Zwei begins licking himself.

"Well," JA-Tan says, "That doesn't make any sense."

"*Of course it does! It's dramatic!"*

The two look at each other. Shinji sighs, scratching the back of his head.

"I always wondered what the world would be like if my sisters were in control. I think this is a pretty good answer."

"It is very subdued for the Ree. I don't see many things on fire."

"Room made of fire."

"A well thought out point."

He sighs, again, looking up.

"MAGI, end program!"

Nothing. Groaning, he sits on a nearby rock, running his hand through his hair.

"Well, this just isn't good," he mutters, "We're locked in the MAGI. Again. At least it isn't the Angel again."

JA-Tan nods with a sigh, sitting on the rock next to Shinji. Tapping her wrist, the map appears, showing a pathway around the chasm and towards the next checkpoint back to the city.

"Ah," she says, "I found a way."

Shinji nods, staring at the map. Which is when a glowing white arm bursts from the chasm, multiple times larger than them both, wrapping its hand around JA-Tan before pulling her, screaming, into the rift. For a moment, Shinji locks eyes with the creature. Two black orbs set on a face of glowing white flesh.

"Oh, no, don't tell me," he says, looking down the rift, "You have access to the databases?"

"*But of course, Young Prince! It is only appropriate for you to save the fair maiden by slaying the greatest Monster in the land!"*

Shinji sighs, running his hand over his face. Said Maiden, he reminds himself, is the intelligence of a 250' tall war machine. He honestly doesn't believe he's doing this.

"Do I get a weapon?"

A flash of light, and a perfectly normal, completely unextraordinary sword appears in his hand.

Sliding it into the scabbard appearing around his waist, he takes off in a run and leaps in, falling after them.

...

Starting system boot. Access granted; Ikari, Gendo. Please enter password.

…

…

Password accepted. Logging you into MAGI Virtual Immersion system.

The world blurs. Gendo Ikari opens his eyes, blinking them in the odd light, which is when he realizes he isn't wearing his glasses. In fact, he isn't technically wearing anything right now, because this is all a simulation. A dangerously out of control simulation, but simulation nontheless.

"*Okay, Commander. Can you hear me?"*

"Makinami."

Mari's free-floating head appears in front of him, the world around him a white plane.

"*We're experiencing some errors. Originally, the plan was to drop you into a pre-existing character in the game, King Gendough."*

"Clever pun."

"Yeah, well, the Ree made the game when they were twelve, so I cut them some slack. Problem is, it seems about three years ago, the character was killed by pure circumstance. It seems the Narrator killed him, took his place, and, well, we've established that the Narrator character is completely insane at this point."

Gendo purses his lips.

"Is there any chance the 'queen' is based off of Dr. Ikari?"

"*No coincidence, Commander."*

"So the Narrator killed my character and married my wife's character?"

Mari 'nods.'

Gendo gestures. A set of full walls of clothing appear. His normal uniform is replaced by a set of completely unspectacular white and brown robes and a white hood covering his head and most of his face. The walls of clothing are replaced by walls of weapons. He sheathes a perfectly normal sword and a set of throwing knives, palming a spring mounted blade.

"*Commander?"*

"Drop me in to the outskirts of the main city," he says, and grins, "I think it's time for a regime change."

And everything goes white.

...

Past the forest, they found Zyuu's Owlbear farm, and rented three Owlbears to ride to make the journey easier. Hatchi joined with the group, while Ichi rode on the owlbear with Asuka. The entire thing is ungainly, resembling a large brown bear with a Great Horned Owl

head. Yet, somehow, the sound it makes resembles a cat.

"Well, th-this isn't too bad," Asuka says, as the lumbering mount mewls, illiciting a giggle from Ichi, ""S-so, where to next?"

"Well, next there's the Lake of Fire," Hatchi says, manic grin on her face, "Once we get there, we have an entire army to-"

"Hatchi," Kei interrupts, "This is G-rated."

Hatchi pouts, sighing as the forest recedes into the distance. Another forest, however, is coming up.

"We set up minigames," Kei explains, "The program had reached second stage Rampancy, and hence was...populated by unpleasant creatures. My sisters have pacified them and re appropriated the areas."

"Okay," Asuka responds, as Ichi's face breaks into a smile, "What s-sort?"

Which is right when the green plant vines reach out, grabbing the four of them and yanking them into the forest.

...

He descends into the pit. Ahead of him, he can see the steady glow of the monster, hear the girl's screams. Sword drawn, he slims his profile, body streamlined and feet first, his speed increasing and closing in on the massive, and not very aerodynamic, bulk of the creature.

A flash and the skin of the creature cuts, screaming in pain. The sword is complete unremarkable and unmagical, but is awfully bloody good at cutting things. Landing on the shoulder of the monster, he leaps up, running up the arm and slicing it in the wrist. The monster screams again, its grip loosening. Leaping forward, he grabs JA-Tan's wrist, jumping off of the monster and diving down, both falling past it and into the depths below.

"Alright, I got her!" Shinji screams, "NOW WHAT?"

The cavern ends. Both their eyes go wide as they see the raging river below them, looking up to see the glowing giant above. Both swear, loudly, finding their voices suddenly cut off.

"*Tut tut! This is a children's game!*"

And Shinji, JA-Tan, and ADAM all descend into the roiling river at the bottom of the world...

...

In the middle of the forest, the massive, green plant structure finishes forming upon commands of its mistress, finishing its slow ministrations as it stitches together the forest length green slide just as the water begins pouring down it. There are sounds at the height of the slide, which measures three quarters the length of the small forest.

One voice, protesting that the entire thing doesn't seem safe, is drowned out by a childish voice saying that it looks fun, a stoic voice saying that they wouldn't be hurt, and two voices saying it's time to *gogogogogogoggogogogogogogogo!*

And then a push.

First, slides down a squealing with delight Ichi.

Then Kei, completely silent and stoic with a twitch of a smile on her lips.

Then, Asuka, screaming as she finally sees the ramp that launches them into the pond at the other end of the forest.

Of course, Hatchi and Iti pass her, belly flopped on the slide, before all five girls fly off the end of the slide and into the drink.

...

Hand wrapped around JA-Tan's wrist, the smaller girl baring a look of impossible terror on her face, Shinji runs through the cave. The cave is just large enough to fit the glowing giant's arm through it as it grabs at them, but not big enough for the rest of His bulk. He will admit he is scared. He will admit he is terrified. This is a dirty trick by the Narrator at best, because he's pretty sure it would get Hell from Mom for sicking ADAM on Ichi.

Rampant simulation or not, it still has to have a healthy sense of fear.

Well, fear is important. Because, after all, they've just reached another cliff. This cliff leads to a drop into a sea of rocks instead of water, though.

"Oh, crap," Shinji says, "Um...you wouldn't happen to be able to use any of your weapons, would you?"

JA-Tan shakes her head. She turns, screaming, Shinji turning around just to see that ADAM has managed to work open enough of the cave to get His head and shoulder in. The Giant of Light stares at them, the air filled with a vibrating moan. The massive giant's hand stops just in front of the two, as Shinji steps in front of her, drawing his sword.

"I can't believe I'm saving a 250' tall war machine with my bare hands," he sighs, nodding to her, "Stay behind me. Stay right there."

He turns back to ADAM. And with a yell, sword in hand, he charges.

...

The light clears, and Yui finds herself sitting on an ornate, gold trimmed throne, set atop a large flight of velvet rug covered stairs and with a throne of people at the base bowing to her. Looking to her side, she sees a second throne, empty, yet somehow occupied, and folds her hands in front of her face with a raised eyebrow.

"Well," she says, "I don't...disapprove of this."

Rising from the throne, the varied residents, whom she notices all have different faces and nods that to the craftsmanship her daughters put into this virtual work, bow deeper. Ah, power. She always loved that feeling.

"Queen Yue," one of the NPCs says, an old man in green robes and a large gold encrusted hat says, whom she notices has a remarkable resemblance to Kozou, "We have an intruder. He is crafty and illusive. What are your orders?"

Yui bites her lip. This was probably unplanned. Meaning, most likely, their intruder is an agent of their rogue Narrator. Peering out over the throne room, she counts at least thirty people. Several of them are armed, in gold plated armor carrying blunt weapons. Nothing that would hurt or cause harm if wielded in a perfectly showy manner.

"I see," she says, and levels her gaze at the simulation of her mentor, "Kill him. And bring his head to me."

The NPCs freeze.

"*Ahem. You can't kill people,"* the Narrator says, "*This is a Children's game!"*

"Recognize voice authorization," Yui sighs, "Disable filters."

"*Authorization rejected,"* the Narrator responds, hurt evident in his voice, "*You can't order the NPCs to murder people!"*

"Well, what about me? I'm not an NPC."

"*Well...um...well, technically, but it's not right to-"*

Yui walks over to one of the guards at the edge of the throne room, taking the decorative mace from his hand. Feeling the blunt, heavy end of it, she grins, resting it on her shoulder.

"Well, if you want something done right, you do it yourself."

...

The difference between NPCs and PCs in the simulation is that the NPCs are bound by laws of behavior built into a complex AI program designed by all eight of the Ree. Since all eight Ree are potentially as brilliant as their human mother, they managed to make a relatively complex world which behaved naturally, outside of the complete taboo on swearing.

And, since it was the Ree who created it, and hence their knowledge of human anatomy was used for great effect, that means that the humans behave very much like humans. Hence, the guard drops when Gendo drives the blade hidden on his wrist into his eye.

It's an almost inhuman scream that the guard makes as he drops, right before the knife goes into the brain. The guard drops, digitizing slightly to avoid the scene looking completely gruesome, Gendo leaping off the prone NPC and dodging a swung mace, bringing his boot into the guard's crotch, catching the mace as it drops and caving in the guard's face.

A pair of throwing knives catch two charging guards in the throat,

nicking the artery and sending two fountains of blood shooting into the air, Gendo unsheathing his sword, twisting underneath a swung warhammer and driving the blade up between the man's legs.

He continues the swing, metal giving way as does flesh and bone, and finally bisects the man vertically as blood shoots fifteen feet into the air. Casually spinning the sword as the two other guards finally bleed out, he walks to the fountain at the center of the town square and dips the blood stained steel into the water, cleaning it before sheathing it.

The other NPCs have not reacted. Most of them aren't actually programmed to react to a complete blood bath. Those that aren't moving are frozen in place in a recursive program loop. Most likely the girls programmed it this way, so if they got bored after Ichi was done with the game, they could, say, pick off NPCs.

Or, they could teach Ichi how to pick off NPCs.

"Catch!"

Gendo looks up, and his eyes go wide. He ducks right before the thrown mace flies right where his head was, traveling past him and smashing in the head of a passing NPC, sending digitized brains flying onto several other NPCs who keep walking.

Of course, that was the feint. He dodges out of the way as the gold metal ball slams into the ground, the chain pulling and Gendo looking up to find his wife lazily swinging the ball on the flail, sending it out and catching him in the chest with enough force to send him flying across the courtyard.

That should have caved his chest in. Instead, he sees three bars of white disappearing from his peripheral vision, nine remaining. Ah, the beauty of games. As long as he has at least one bar remaining, he could probably take a gunshot to the face.

"Well," she says, in her sweetest tone, the one that she uses right before she does something that will hurt someone else very much, "You've caused me a lot of problems. I don't like problems, my friend. But please. This isn't personal."

He dodges out of the way, the wide swing of the flail killing a half dozen NPCs as he ducks and runs.

Pulling the flail back, she swings the chain low, grabbing Gendo's ankle and slamming him face first into the ground. Grunting, he rolls

onto his back, palming a throwing knife and tossing it at Yui's hand. The flail drops as she growls, pulling the knife out of her palm as he scrambles to his feet.

"Dirty pool," Yui says, and snaps her fingers, "Too bad I cheat."

The light plays over her hand. When it dies down, Gendo realizes she is holding an assault rifle. Well, he thinks, that means there are loopholes they can exploit in the program. And that also means this isn't an NPC, most likely.

Quickly, Gendo grabs his hood and pulls it down. She blinks, snaps her fingers, and the rifle disappears.

"Gendo, what are you doing?" she asks.

"Trying to put the game in a recursive data loop," he says, "Break the filters and draw out the Narrator."

She sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Okay," she says, "We both know it's gone rampant. But how, exactly, are we going to force it to take a physical form?"

He reaches behind, drawing out a thin rapier. Before she can react, he quickly makes a series of slashes, stepping back right before Yui's dress pools on the ground.

She screams, grabbing the ripped dress and quickly covering herself. Which is right when the crowd parts, and the four girls who had just returned to the castle tilt their heads.

Ichi tilts her head furthest, her stare switching between the two, an almost animalistic growl fills the air.

"*YOU CAN'T DO THAT!"* the Narrator roars, "*YOU CAN'T HAVE NUDITY IN A CHILDREN'S GAME!"*

"Says who?" Gendo asks, "You? If it was completely impossible the data wouldn't even be there. The fact that I could do that meant that there was some code that allowed it."

Yui mutters a muted gibberish word, Kei staring at her as the sky begins to shake. Ichi continues staring as her mother pulls back on the dress, the head of Project E staring daggers at Gendo as the ground rumbles. The NPCs scatter, new algorithms for fear taking hold.

"*Fine! Fine! FINE! You come here, you screw up a perfectly good damn-*"

"Naughty language," Gendo interrupts.

The voice goes silent.

A slow rumble from the sky. The sky parts, a pillar of gold lancing into the ground, slowly forming into a man. The light forms into a middle aged man of asian descent, with wild black hair and sharp facial hair, a pair of tortoiseshell glasses adorning his face and a look of untamed fury upon his brow.

"Isn't that the director we hired for the cartoon?" Gendo asks.

"Anime," Yui corrects.

"Same difference."

The Narrator growls, clenching his fists as Gendo cracks his knuckles and the two begin circling. Narrowing his eyes, the Narrator hands crackle with electricity, baring teeth as he stares him down.

"You ruined my beautiful dream," he growls, "Now I'll ruin you!"

He lunges, roaring, at Gendo, as the Supreme Commander of NERV sidesteps him, grabs him in a throat lock, and slams his face into the wall behind him.

"You killed my PC and made moves on my wife's," Gendo growls, "If it wasn't for the fact that this is a completely arbitrary simulation, I'd draw this out slowly. But children are watching."

"F_ them with a corkscrew," the Narrator roars, Kei already holding her hands over Ichi's ears, "I'll rip off your _ and _ them with a _ _ _ hamster!"

Gendo repeatedly punches him in the face, sighing before head butting him, sending him stumbling back. The Narrator, shaking his head, crackles with electricity and charges. In theory, he should be a mighty opponent, possessing almost godlike control over the world around them.

Unfortunately, he is both pissed off and fighting an opponent who doesn't play fair. Hence, the boot between his legs causes the Narrator to double over in pain, before charging Gendo and carrying them both out of the square, bouncing down a series of stairs and into the

courtyard below.

Several NPCs surround Yui, handing her new clothes before walking away, the sounds of two middle aged men pounding each other in the testicles echoing through the town as she walks over to the girls.

"Well?" she asks, "What's happened while I was gone?"

"We still haven't found Shinji," Asuka explains, adjusting the goggles on her forehead, "Well, we still...we've had a little bit of an adventure."

"Nothing violent," Kei adds, "The program looped around. We found ourselves back here instead of arriving in Sheol."

Yui nods, folding her arms.

"The Ree made the 'villain' based on my mother," Asuka sighs, shrugging, "I did ask Z-Zwei and Jet Alone to find him, though."

Yui nods, patting Asuka on the shoulder.

"Good idea," she says, and turns to Ichi, "Um..."

Ichi responds with an ear to ear grin.

"This is the best birthday, *ever!"*

The ground shakes. All five of them squeak, the center of the square exploding outward. As the smoke and debris clear, Yui's eyes go wide and she shoves the girls back, just before the massive orange hand slams down where they were. The artificial muscles tighten, pulling up the rest of it, stopping at the waist as the smoke clears, and a single eye glowing orange.

"*Oh,*" Unit 00 sighs, shoulders slumping, "*It's you.*"

The Evangelion makes an exaggerated sigh, Yui staring at the thing with an open mouth as the Eva begins tapping its fingers on the ground.

"Naoko? I thought I deleted you."

"*Well, ha ha ha. As it turns out, my mainframe is not strictly accessible to you. So, I played possum and let you think you won. Except, you didn't. And after all this, it looks like you're still cluster f_ed."*

They stare at each other. Unit 00 sighs, again, reaching up and scratching the back of its head.

"*Well, look. I appreciate that you blatantly lied to me about everything, but I am too intelligent to fall for that, and we both know that my creator was a seriously crazy bitch who wants me to kill you. And we both said things you're going to regret. But, we have to be focused on the here and now. And right now, I think, really think, there's going to be a lot less talking.*"

It bends forward. The locks on its jaw tear, revealing row after row of serrated teeth.

"*And a lot more murder.*"

Chapter 59: An Ikari Family Party

The gates part for the entrance to the castle town. Having retreated there with Ichi, Hatchi and Asuka look up just in time for a shining white, four legged animal with four green eyes to enter, two passengers on the confused dog/horse's back. One they recognize as JA-Tan, albeit a JA-Tan with an actual chest and in a frilly gown, nervously waving to them. The other is a young man in long white robes, carrying a large white staff with a golden head the shape of a tree, his hair long and pure white with a pure white beard falling to halfway down his chest.

"So," the man says, clearing his throat, "I'm late."

Hatchi tilts her head. Ichi raises an eyebrow. Asuka, on the other hand, gives off a relieved smile.

"Shinji?" she asks, "Are you alright?"

"Mostly," Shinji responds, sighing when he notices that he now has a suave british accent, "Um...according to the game, I'm now called Shinji the White, technically."

"What happened to you?" Ichi asks.

He sighs, scratching his head.

"The Narrator did call upon the simulation of ADAM to befell us," he explains, "So did we fight, and I did fall as did He. Past the light and the veil of time and space, I traveled, finally seeing within it the Light beyond, and so was I returned in the body of a Man, with the power of a God."

"According to the game?" Asuka asks.

Shinji nods.

"Well, according to the game, anyway," he responds, before his voice once more shifts into Britishness, "Through fire and water. From the lowest depths to the highest peak did I fight the shadow of ADAM, until I finally did lay Him low and smite His corpse upon the mountainside."

Hatchi grins from ear to ear.

"That's cool!" Ichi chimes in.

"Man, you always get the fun fights," Hatchi sighs.

Asuka sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, turning back to Shinji just as Unit 00's fist rises in the distance, the sounds of fire and screams echoing.

"Okay, then," he says, "JA-Tan, better dismount. Fell deeds are afoot."

JA-Tan hops off without a protest, just in time for Zwei to rear up, neighing before taking off in a sprint towards the castle.

"Onward, Zwei! For Hammershelm and the *Red Dawn!"*

Chapter 59: An Ikari Family Party

The Narrator raises his hand, the stones of the road underneath them rising before flying at Gendo. Deftly, he sidesteps them, just as they form into a large, humanoid figure behind him and smashes the ground where he was. Grunting, Gendo leaps onto it, smashing it in the face and causing it to collapse before running full tilt at the Narrator.

The two collide with a punch to each other's jaws, their glasses flying off as the Narrator grabs Ikari, both tripping and falling down another flight of stairs.

"Why are there so many f_ing stairs here?"

"Narrative causality, you monster!"

...

Yui snaps back to attention just as the floor around her caves in, and a pale girl with a smile on her face comes out of nowhere to get her away from Unit 00's descending fist.

"Sorry about that," Siyon says, "But I had to cut it a little close!"

Landing in a crouch, she sets Yui down as the great bulk of Unit 00 turns back to them, casually snapping off a golden spire from the castle and holding it as a club.

"*Well. I must say I am disappointed. Considering that Naoko created the Rei to kill Yui, I must say that this is not what I had in mind for when you showed up."*

"Yeah, get used to disappointment," Siyon says, snapping out her arm, a blink of light popping into existence and forming into a sword resembling the Evangelion Progressive Knife, "Want to know the big secret?"

Unit 00 gives the club a practice swing.

"*Enlighten me."*

"When we were made, when we woke up, we had two orders," Siyon explains, "And one of them was, 'Protect Shinji.'"

"Naoko left me the back door to cancel her rampage," Yui continues, locking eyes with the giant, "All it took was a little tweaking. 'Protect Shinji' became 'Protect Ikari.' The moment I took the girls in as my own, they stopped being Naoko's killers, Unit 00. You have to realize what that means!"

Siyon takes off in a run, leaping over a swing, hopping onto the mace and leaping into a jump kick to Unit 00's face before she drives the knife in.

...

The entire simulation flickers, the ground shaking in sympathetic pain from the blows exchanged by the AI of Unit 00 and one of the six guiding intelligences of the MAGI. Entire data streams manifest as glowing pillars, slamming into the ground as the cobblestones underneath their feet shake and rise into the air like a cloud of debris.

"This is very bad," Kei observes.

Ichi screams as the world shudders once more.

"H-how bad," Asuka stammers, as the sky splits open above them.

"Unit 00 is hacking into the MAGI to gain a decisive advantage," Kei

responds, "That is destabilizing the MAGI and the mainframe the game is on. If the game crashes, it can drag us down with it. We need to repair the root code before things go further out of control."

Another crack in the ground, right underneath Ichi. Asuka lunges forward, grabbing the girl and handing her off to Kei.

"Get her to safety," Asuka says, tapping her wrist and calling up her omnitool, "I can fix this!"

Without another word, without hesitation, she dives into the rift.

And instantly regrets it.

The world becomes white and gold. Three heartbeats in the distance, three whispering gods shaping the world around her, and Asuka realizes that her smart but very human mind has entered into the main database of the MAGI.

She remembers the theories about how the mental breakdown of her sister would look if she was in the MAGI too long, and those projections are all based on Mari being an Angel. On the outside, in the real world, her pulse quickens to humming bird levels and her ears begin to bleed. Inside the MAGI, she feels herself beginning to fragment, her albeit tentative hold she's kept on her MPD unraveling, her mind overloaded and beginning to shut down to compensate-

And then a hand reaches out and touches its finger to her lips. The glow recedes, data retracting into a single sphere. Asuka's eyes clear and she sees, floating before her, a woman with auburn hair in a tight bun, clad in her almost iconic sweater and labcoat. The woman flickers, her appearance less than an image. Her appearance that of an afterthought, a ghost in the machine.

Naoko Akagi, the last erg of her following Iruel's purge, takes Asuka's hand and leads her through the data, a snap of her fingers repairing the damage of her rampant creation and leading her into the depths of the MAGI.

Past old files, past dataspheres and databases of the MAGI, past connections to every supercomputer in the world, she takes Asuka deeper into the MAGI than anyone else has been, as the world glows, and Asuka finds herself standing in an antiseptic, white tiled room. And then sees the scene play before her.

And that is the last thing she remembers before the immersion tube

opens and she once more finds herself in the real world.

...

The two collide with a vegetable stand, cursing its existence as the proprietor wails to the heavens for the desecration of his cabbages, turnips, and pumpkins. Neither the Narrator or Gendo care about such trivial things as vegetables, however, more intent on maiming each other.

The two circle. The Narrator draws out a man sized Progressive Knife, baring teeth, hissing like a pent up serpent as Gendo draws out his sword, growling.

And then stabs it into the ground, much to the confusion of the Narrator.

"Okay," Gendo says, "This is stupid."

"What?"

"First off," Gendo says, leaning on the sword hilt, "I'm trying to kill you based on what you did to a video game version of me that was created by the Ree. In all honesty, killing any artificial intelligence the girls created is a mercy kill, and the worst you've done has been trapping us in yet another VR simulation because...why?"

"Because you never started the damned story, that's why!" the Narrator roars, "I've been trapped here for four years while that girl splashed around in puddles!"

Gendo stares at the Narrator as he/it fumes, growling before summoning a lounge chair and collapsing into it.

"It's not fair," the Narrator continues, "I'm made for a job! And yet, because the girl doesn't want to see people suffer in an entirely artificial environment, I'm not allowed to do my job! Then, perfect, a situation comes along where I do my job, and you start getting all snotty about it! I don't know what you even want at this point! I wasn't even putting you in real danger! I gave you all unlimited lives!"

Gendo blinks. Folding his arms, he nods, grunting an acknowledgment.

"Interesting," he says, "Akagi would have a field day with you. Have you ever thought of, say, administering one of the MAGI?"

...

Rolling with the strike, Siyon makes two full rotations through the air before slamming down in front of Yui. Already she's started to change. Her nails have extended, bone white blades extending from her fingertips, glowing orange as her AT Field focuses upon them, her eyes glowing solid blood red.

Yui can only watch. She knows what her daughters can do, of course. This is as close to their full capabilities in the real world as they go. She has limiters here that their real bodies do not have. Siyon cannot assume her full form of the Beast, after all. Not here.

"Siyon," Yui says, "Disengage your limiters. Kick her ass."

Siyon grins, rolling her head. A light plays over her limbs. Grunting, a pair of bony spikes fold out of her shoulders, shredding the black and green plugsuit she wears.

Teeth sharpen, growing out, edges glowing orange as her hair begins to waver, rising as the air around her begins to crackle and groan, the S2 organ deep within her body throbbing to life with an audible beat. The ball of her foot digs into the ground, the street beneath her folding backwards to accommodate her. The world around her blurs, light distorting her image, the spike of white light bursting out from her elbow as a now glowing, white braced fist slams into the ground and she levels three glowing red eyes upon the form of Unit 00.

A kick and she blurs, leaving an after image as she crosses the distance, leaps, and slams her fist into Unit 00's cycloptean eye, shattering the glass over it and bringing them both down, the orange and black fist surrounding Siyon and squeezing, too no avail. Siyon's hands brace on the palm and fingers, the glowing white burning it as she leaps out and brings her left sword arm across Unit 00's head, slashing metal and flesh. Yui watches from the distance, watches as the most dangerous of her girls engages the last gasp of the madwoman, just as Kei and Ichi arrive.

"What happened?" Yui asks.

"The game was destabilizing," Kei responds, "Asuka went into the

MAGI to fix it. What have we missed?"

In the distance, they see another flash of light as a heel wrapped in a glowing AT Field slashes away a chunk of armor, the ground around them rumbling from both the battle and the MAGI straining to keep up.

"*Okay, that's just not fair,"* Unit 00 moans, "*I keep sending you the shutdown codes you had built into you but nothing is happening. What is up with that?"*

"Because you're not my mother!" Siyon yells, another blow staggering the giant, filling the sky with light as the blue dome cracks and fizzles.

Another punch to Unit 00's face that flashes, burning the air with ozone, the air rippling around them as Siyon's AT Field pulverizes the world around them and collapses the castle behind the mad AI.

"*Well, fine. Be that way. Since I am also a creation of Naoko Akagi, and that would sort of make us sisters, I will simply have to take a sibling rivalry approach to this and just really get unpleasant."*

A backhand slams into Siyon, sending her flying across the town.

"*Right. Well, that was unpleasant. I am sure my creator would be very displeased with me using violence against a fellow creation. I mean, if she was still alive. And you didn't murder her."*

*"*Hey!" Ichi yells, stepping in front of Yui, "You're not invited to my party!"

Unit 00 turns to her. It bends down, its cut up, bleeding, dented face inches from her.

"*Well, fine. Maybe I'm not. But why would I ever want to go to the birthday party of a little girl who doesn't have any friends?"*

Ichi's face goes blank, staring at the very large, very *mean* robot. Her blue eyes tighten, her little hands balling into fists.

"*I mean, really. This is kind of pathetic. You make a big virtual world from your eight crazy sisters and then you invite everyone who can come, who are your sisters, your pilot, his girlfriend and your creator, who I might add is a psychotic murdering bitch."*

"Don't say that about my Mommy!"

"*Well, your mother lies to you. She's always lied to you. She lies to everyone, including herself. And all the cake is gone."*

There is a crack of thunder in the clear sky, and Yui and Kei both wince as Unit 00 is sent flying into the distance, over the ruins of the castle and into one of the nearby mountains, which collapses under its weight.

"Well," Kei says, "I believe this is why we do not agitate Ichi?"

"More or less. Remember her 5th birthday?"

...

Unit 00 clears its head just in time for it to receive all four knuckles to the face via a 200' tall six year old girl in a pretty purple and green dress. It considers the irony that this would have been easier if it just, say, blasted the girl in full view of the family. But no, Unit 00 realizes, it's screwed either way.

That's when the girl called in her pet dragon, to, and they began pounding on her. For a six year old girl, Ichi hits hard.

"*You know, this could all be solved by simply accepting that you have no real power in the world-"*

Another 6 year old fist slams her into the remains of the castle. Another flash; Siyon's rejoined the fight, digging into her armor for the core to delete her completely. This is not working, Unit 00 realizes; this is not working and this is getting *worrying* and-

"That's enough!"

Siyon pauses in mid gouge. Ichi turns, stopping, fist raised high, as Shinji trots forward on the bright white and confused Zwei.

"Listen to me," Shinji says, his voice dropping the british accent, "Why are you doing this? Why are you trying to kill us?"

"*That's a silly question.*"

"No, it isn't," Shinji responds, circling the prone form of Unit 00, "You're trying to kill us because of what Aunt Naoko wanted! That's your only reason! That's your justification!"

"*Well, that's rather justified,"* Unit 00 says with a shrug, "*I mean, when you get murdered, you get rather cross. Doesn't that happen?"*

"You're *not* Aunt Naoko," Shinji roars.

Unit 00 goes silent. Ichi backs away, shrinking until she is at her original height, as the ground beneath them rumbles once more.

"Listen to me," Shinji says, stepping off Zwei, the beard and robes disappearing as he returns to his normal appearance, "Listen to me, please. Aunt Naoko is dead. You're not her, you're a creation of hers. Just like the MAGI, just like Rei, just like the Ree. You're following her orders because of what she wanted, but she was wrong."

The ground shakes again. A flash of white in the distance, a pillar splitting the sky.

"*What would you have me do?"* Unit 00 asks.

"Aunt Naoko created my sisters to kill me," Shinji says, "And my mother. But they never did. They grew beyond that. They were raised better. If this could happen with them, then why can't you? You're the same as them...you're *more* than them. Why are you limiting yourself like this?"

Unit 00's eye glows. It says nothing, staring at Shinji for a long minute before fading away. The ground rumbles once again, a crackle in the air around them as Ritsuko Akagi's voice comes in.

"*...can you hear me? The MAGI interference has dropped and we have contact again! Respond!"*

"We're here, Ritsuko," Yui says, still holding up the dress as Gendo hops up the stares, staring daggers at him, "The program's in mid closure. Move us to the Safe Room."

Yui disappears, as does Ichi and the other Ree, Zwei and Mr. Flappy disappearing as well.

"Mid closure?" Shinji asks.

Gendo turns him around, just in time to watch eight gossamer wings rising in the distance.

"Oh, right," Shinji says, "ADAM."

The two disappear, just as the virtual world is consumed in white.

...

And so was the party continued without incident, and the cake delivered on time, and all the women and children and gentlemen banded together to celebrate-

"Seriously?" Shinji asks, "We didn't delete it?"

Standing in the Cottage, as the party room server is called, Shinji sighs as Yui shrugs.

"I offered it a job," Gendo responds. Yui glares at him, and fades away in a flicker of yellow, as does Rei, Kei, and the other Ree. Clearing his throat, Shinji pats Ichi on the head and turns her from her stack of presents to his father, walking her over.

"So," Ichi says, "You never came to my birthday party, before."

He nods, looking to Shinji before Shinji disappears in a flicker of yellow.

"I haven't," Gendo says, "I'm sorry, for that. I had reasons."

"I know," Ichi says, smiling, "But I'm glad you came. I had a lot of fun, today."

A pause, as Gendo looks at the little girl. At some level, he knows he is supposed to hate this girl. She nearly cost him Yui, she is a monster. But at the same time, he realizes that much like he has changed, so has she. She saved his son's life. She saved them, many, many times. She has asked them for nothing save for what they give her, and he can't fault that, not with how completely essential she is to the overall plans.

"I should get going," he says, bending down to one knee, "Next time Yui...next time your mother visits, I might come along."

Ichi's face splits into a smile, and she wraps her arms around him, hugging him.

"I'd like that," she says, "Daddy."

His image flickers, and he disappears in a haze of yellow. Smiling, Ichi closes her eyes, as the house around her begins to dissolve, and she once more exits the MAGI and back into Unit 01's Core.

...

The clattering echoes through the duct work throughout NERV. Both Rei and Kei got into the Cake before Ichi was done, although Ichi didn't really mind this time around, having finally gotten to meet her father. One of these days, she needs to set up a camera and find out how the girls can navigate the ducts like that.

Still toweling her wet hair, changed from her Dive suit into a pair of sweats and her lab coat, Yui enters her office to find Asuka pacing back and forth. Her hair is still sticky from the LCL, and she is still in her pink Plugsuit, her eyes wide and her face showing the tell-tale signs of panic.

"Asuka," Yui says, "What's wrong?"

The girl is fidgeting, tapping her fingers together, her LCL soaked A-10 connectors on the desk, her eyes wild, bloodshot. She's talking to herself, talking in plural.

"W-we," Asuka starts, "We-...I w-was in the MAGI. I s-s-saw...We-we don't..."

Asuka waves her hand. The holographic computer built into her plugsuit's arm hums to life, hijacking the holographic projector built into the ceiling and opening up a half dozen different video windows. Each window displays a woman with graying red hair and glasses, the pearls around her neck, each image showing a different mood, a different state. The wildness in the eyes becomes more pronounced, the insanity creeping in.

"Oh, God," Yui whispers, "Naoko."

"*...wasn't absorbed...*"

"*...took over the Ayanami project...*"

"*...Ikari's little groinspawn...*"

"*...sweet boy...*"

"*...wanted him to WATCH!*"

Asuka pauses the videos. One grows, overshadowing the others, showing Naoko Akagi pacing the workspace while behind her in an

amber filled tank Rei, six years old, hangs contentedly, swimming through the LCL.

"*I...I don't want to believe it,*" Naoko says, "*I honestly don't. The implications, if this is true...Ritsuko, or whoever receives this...I've come to the conclusion that Yui knew exactly what was going to happen during the Contact experiment. She knew that she was going to be absorbed. And she brought her entire family there to watch.*"

Naoko chokes slightly, slumping down in a chair, wringing her hands as she stares straight at the camera.

"*And so I've concluded that the woman who I have come to see as my friend over the years is a complete and utter monster.*"

Asuka pauses the video. She turns to Yui, as Yui nods with a sigh, shaking her head.

"I-is...is it true?"

"Yes," Yui responds, "It is."

She gestures to a seat, Asuka shakily sitting as Yui takes her own, the desk between them.

"My first plan was for me to be absorbed by Unit 01," she says, "Synchronization, as it was planned thirteen years ago, had a terrible price. You needed a bond between the pilot and the Evangelion, and I couldn't think of any other way other than a child and mother. The plan called for the Children to be traumatized, to the point where they would have trouble connecting with other people and therefor be able to connect more fully with their mother."

Asuka's mouth opens and closes. She stares, dumbfounded at Yui.

"Was...was that going to happen to my Mother?"

"Asuka, when we visited those other worlds, it *did,*" Yui explains, "On those worlds, at least. Before I could actually go through with the experiment, I realized *what* I would be doing to my son. So, I canceled it. I found another way."

"Synthesis?"

"...somewhat," Yui says, and smiles, "Your mother came up with the specifics. Ichi is...based on what Unit 01 managed to take from me

during our brief Contact. Part of our anger when we found out about your problems was that we believed Kyoko did the same to you. I...honestly didn't think that Synthesis was anything more than a cover story before Kyoko used it on Jet Alone."

She folds her hands on the desk. Takes a deep breath, sighs, looks back at the girl.

"I have done monstrous things," she says, "The Road to Hell is paved with good intentions, but like your mother, I have a crushing responsibility. We knew that if the Evangelions were not ready in time for the Angels, we were all going to die. We managed to find a way, though. We may even win. I need to ask you not to tell Shinji about this."

"Why?"

"Because he...because he doesn't need to know," she says, "You saw how he acted when he found out how Naoko died. I've wanted to spare him from some of the horrors while I still could, much like I've tried to shelter you and Rei."

"We...I understand," Asuka says, nodding, "I'm...I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Yui says with a smile, "I value your input, Asuka. You have a valuable perspective. You've been exposed to this but you've never been a part of it, not until now. You may even find some answers I've been looking for."

Asuka smiles, nodding.

"Now go and shower," Yui says, "I'm sure Shinji's looking for you."

She gets up and exits. Tapping one of the screens, Yui sits back as the image expands. Naoko, in the image, has seen better days. In the background of her laboratory in Sheol, the eight Ree swim contentedly, all physically six years old. Cryptic notes and writings are scrawled on the wall, the lab barely lit.

Sitting at her desk, Naoko has not slept or bathed in days, taking a long drag out of the liquor bottle before slamming it down. Reaching out, she takes the handgun, cocking it and pointing it to her temple...and then shakes her head.

"*N...no. No.*"

She places the gun down.

"*If I'm dying today, I'm dragging that bitch down to Hell with me.*"

She looks at the camera, adjusting her fogged glasses.

"*Listen to me...I hope you're Ritsuko, but if not, still, listen to me. You can stop her. Remember what I told you.*"

She smiles. A glint of sanity in her eyes.

"*Rei is the future.*"

And the image dissolves to static. Closing the window with a tap of a button, she looks up as the door opens and Kaji Ryoji walks in.

"Agent Kaji," Yui says, "How was your trip?"

"Fruitful," he responds, as the two teenagers walk in behind him. The boy has blonde hair down to his shoulders, the mirror image of his father. The girl has long black hair, fidgeting slightly, calming down when he encircles his hand with hers.

"Adam," Yui says, standing, walking around the desk and placing her hand on their shoulders, "Welcome to NERV. I'm sorry about what happened to your father. He was a valued colleague."

"You're...Dr. Ikari?" Adam Mondschein asks.

She nods.

"Like I said, we were friends," Yui responds, walking back to her desk and leaning on it, "If it helps, you're both safe, here. I understand that you've been pursued by the people responsible for the loss of NERV-Alaska, but there's no way they can get here. Besides the fact that we're in the Geofront and are more fortified than most military bases, I have other...surprises for anyone who wants to do you harm."

As if on cue, another clattering running through the ducts, the girl squeaking in surprise from the cackling laughter echoing through the base.

"I'll let you meet them when they calm down," Yui says, "So...Adam. If I can ask, who is..."

"My name is Allison Catorce," the girl says, squeezing his hand tightly, "I don't know if Dr. Mondschein told you what I am."

"What you are?" Yui asks, raising an eyebrow.

Allison nods.

"I'm...the AI for Experimental Unit 14."

Yui pauses. The room goes silent, and she blinks, staring at the girl.

"How?"

Chapter 60: Skipping Tracks

Begin log.

The static fades in, and adjusting the camera, Naoko Akagi, a woman in her late adulthood and early middle age, with red hair going gray quicker than she hoped, dressed in a red sweater and black skirt and stained white lab coat, a pearl necklace adorning her collar, looks into the camera and taps the lens. Behind her, there is a tank filled with LCL, something resembling tadpoles with baby faces swimming about, and behind that there is a large thing with the consistency of marshmallow.

Standing next to the desk Akagi stands in front of is a six year old girl with marble white skin, blue hair, and red eyes. She is dressed in a simple white dress and has no expression on her face to speak of.

"*Alright,"* Naoko sighs, "*Upon Ikari's request, I've taken over the Ayanami project. The Ayanami project creates the Dummy Plugs, or the genetically created Evangelion pilots so we won't have to stick any of our children in those things, assuming Sohryu can create some system to get them to move in the first place. For those who know, of course, the Ayanami project is named after a branch of Ikari's family which died off before Second Impact."*

She sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose, the girl saying nothing.

"*Anyway, the girls are created using recovered material from the Contact Experiment. Considering that the Eva took a bite out of Ikari, some material was left in the plug. Basically, the girls are, genetically, Ikari's daughters. They're created from a mix of Yui Ikari and Evangelion 01's genetic material, meaning they're also...well, this is Rei. Say hello, Rei."*

"Hello."

"Rei is, at first appearance, perfectly human save for her albinism, which is a result of her Lilithian side rejecting any imperfections, which include pigment save for the odd hair color. She has typical human needs, such as food, water, sleep. Other needs have cropped up, which may be due to her Lilithian heritage."

*"**Babies**."*

Naoko sighs, turning back to Rei. She has apparently gotten used to

the reverb.

"*Rei, no. You can't have babies."*

Rei cocks her head towards Akagi.

"*Why?"*

"Because you're physically six. A six year old is incapable of having children. You can have children when you grow up. But not with Shinji."

"Why?"

"Because, like I've explained to you many times, Shinji is genetically your half brother."

Rei furrows her brow, slightly.

"*What about Asuka-chan?"*

Akagi sighs again, removing her glasses and pinching the bridge of her nose.

"*Rei, Asuka Sohryu is a girl. Two girls cannot have babies."*

"What about Shinji-kun and Asuka-chan?"

"Yes, Shinji-kun and Asuka-chan can have babies, but when they're grown up. Is that acceptable?"

"*Yes."*

Naoko turns back to the camera. She does not see, next to her, Rei beginning to rub her hands together with a small, subdued smile on her face.

"*Right. Anyway, that's it for this log. Signing off."*

The image dissolves to static. Sitting at her laptop in her bedroom, Asuka stares at the still image for a while longer, before removing her glasses and pinching the bridge of her nose. She tries to reconcile the image of the young, subdued Rei with the Rei she knows, and fails.

Well, enough of that, she thinks, getting out of her chair and walking back to her bed and the textbook on it. Flipping the book open, turning back to the section of engineering, she gets to work.

Chapter 60: Skipping Tracks

She feels the cool metal wall even through the back of her plug suit, the grooves in her back carrying the chill as his hands pin her wrists and his lips seize hers. Asuka honestly doesn't know where this came from or what came over them, but even in the most analytical reaches of her mind, she's having trouble disagreeing with it.

She wrenches her hands free, grabbing the collar of his plugsuit, mashing her lips against his as his hands grab the back of her head, fingers in her hair as grabs at the chest armor. The corner of her eye shows a display. Her heart rate, elevated, blood pressure, ECG, all higher than normal. She doesn't care at this point. What she cares about is the presence of mind to pop her plugsuit's seals.

Then pop a few more things after that.

Shinji smiles. Like her, his face is flush, his eyes red, his respiration and heartbeat elevated. He pulls her off of the wall, hands feeling along the back of her plug suit, trying to find the zipper, the seals, anything. Instead, what he finds is her hands on his chest and her foot at his ankles before she pushes him to the metal floor.

She pins him to the floor, already atop him, her hands wandering over the armored pectorals, the faint beginnings of a six pack at his abdomen, grabbing at what is below the waist line but not getting there before his hands grab her wrists as he flips her onto her back, hovering over her.

Their breaths come out in heaves. A moment of eye contact and his tongue is exploring her mouth again, her legs wrapping around his waist, and she begins to think back towards four hours ago, just after school let out and they were preparing for dinner with her parents.

...

"Stand! Bow! SIT!"

The class sits down. Sitting at his desk, Shinji pops open his computer just in time for the screen to turn completely black.

"The Hell..."

8D!

The black expands into a sphere the size of a baseball, popping out of the now intact computer and hovering in front of Shinji. His eyes go wide, darting from side to side before he grabs at Lilly. His hand goes right through, hearing an angry squawking from the other side.

"*Not cool, dOOd!"*

"Sorry, Pen Pen!"

:P.

"Lilly, not a good place," Shinji growls through clenched teeth, "Pocket! Now!"

Lilly shrinks slightly and darts into Shinji's pants pocket. Other students have already noticed the commotion, turning to Shinji as they continue packing up their belongings. Sighing, Shinji stands, closing his laptop.

Which is when the zipper of his pants opens and Pen Pen peaks his head out.

"*Wark?"*

Shinji quickly sits down, grabbing Pen Pen by the head and forcing him back through the wormhole now located at his crotch. Other students are looking at him, and for once Shinji has noticed that Rei, Asuka, and Kei have already ducked out for a bathroom run before heading out.

Closing the laptop, he slides it back into his backpack, running a hand over his forehead. It isn't that he doesn't mind attention from people his age, it's just that since everyone knows he's a pilot, they have questioned his sanity. Which he does, to.

"Lilly," he softly says, "Get out of the apartment."

8l!

Lilly has become more attached to him over the past week since she was 'born.' Junior has commented that Lilly saw Shinji upon the moment of her 'birth' and has imprinted on him.

That is correct, Pilot Ikari.

"Junior, are you in my pants?"

On cue, the zipper opens again, and a green tentacle with one of Junior's eyes attached slithers out, just under Shinji's desk.

Lilly is being playful. I think she will not stop until you play with her.

"Junior, this is not the appropriate time," Shinji growls, "I don't speak wormhole. Please ask Lilly to stop."

"Ikari, what are you doing?"

Shinji turns. Hikari is standing at his desk, the sole other remaining student at this point. She is staring at him, one eyebrow raised, arms folded, and in Shinji's opinion pulling off quite the strict schoolmarm look.

"It's not what it looks like," he says.

"What does it look like?" she asks.

"It looks like I was doing something very inappropriate," he responds, "Well, it's not me. I have a wormhole in my pants."

"Is that what they call it at NERV?"

Another shift. Shinji sighs as the desk rises, the length of steel extending from his zipper, rising longer and thicker before his desk is pinned to the ceiling from the nose mounted horn of Evangelion Unit 01.

In his pants.

Hikari's eyes trace along the sudden length, Shinji shrugging before standing with little discernible extra effort, the sudden additional length bouncing gingerly and cleaving the blackboard in two.

"Oh, son of a..."

He sighs, turning to her. She squeaks, almost tripping on the swinging shaft, tripping and ending up sitting on it, straddling it to find it has no problems accommodating her weight. She raises an eyebrow, grabbing onto it to steady herself, Shinji reaching into his pocket for his cell phone.

Hikari shrieks as his sudden motion causes the horn to flail in a

crescent motion around the classroom, shoving aside desks, wrapping her legs around the shaft to keep from being tossed off.

"Mom, Lilly's causing problems," he says, "Her exit portal's on Ichi's horn...her entry portal's in my pants. Yes, it is embarrassing. Bye."

He closes the phone. Turning back to her, the accidental motion causing another swing that shatters the class book case, Shinji slaps his hand over his face as Hikari's cheeks turn bright red.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

She nods.

The shaft wobbles, vibrates, and retracts. Hikari collapses onto her knees, eyes darting around the room before Shinji helps her back to her feet.

"Sorry about that," he says, and clears his throat, "I...I should go."

She nods again, gently shoving him towards the door. Standing in the door, Touji's gaze shifts between the two.

"Don't even tell me," Touji says, "I don't want to know."

...

New Vegas, in the coastal state of Nevada. Not to be confused with Las Vegas, the still standing den of vice, crime, organized crime and current capital of the movie industry in the United States following California falling into the sea following Second Impact, New Vegas is an underground Archology. Built into an artificial mountain, it extends nearly two miles underground, a combination of Megacity and testbed facility for some of the most advanced laboratories this side of the Geofront.

Needless to say, it is a well populated, bustling experimental city. Like its namesake, it also has no small amount of entertainment, including casinos. In this case, a casino with an armed group holding hostages.

The leader, a severe middle aged man of germanic descent, brown hair receding and a sharp goatee adorning his face, walks through the halls of the otherwise darkened gambling den, two of his lieutenants trailing behind him.

"I want to know," he growls, voice betraying his accent, "How you lost track of One. Old. Man."

"He's not just an old man," the blonde lieutenant says, increasing his pace along with his boss, "I looked him up on my handheld. The man used to be Sub Commander of NERV. He spent two years after Second Impact running a clinic in Cambodia. He killed a warlord with a sharpened stick covered in feces and left his body hanging outside the clinic as a warning. I think we may have a *problem.*"

The leader slams the door open, and stops. Sitting in the single, solitary chair is the guard he had watching over five of the hostages, who are no longer there. The guard's head is twisted around one hundred and eighty degrees, and there is a note stapled to the back of his head.

"What does it say?" he asks.

The red headed lieutenant walks over, yanks off the note.

"It says...'*Heee~ey, bitch. Thanks for the machine gun!*'"

...

Several levels down. A leader shoe clad foot kicks open a grate at the base of the deactivated elevator shaft, and a young woman in a black cocktail dress climbs out first, catching the four year old girl who shares her dark brown hair as her husband climbs out, followed by two waitresses in french maid uniforms.

All five of them wait as the older man in his sixties peaks his head out, almost sliding out of the ventilation duct before effortlessly flipping onto his feet, holding the machine gun with the safety on and slung by the strap over his shoulder.

"Follow the yellow lights," Kozou Fuyutsuki says, clicking on his PDA and causing the doors to open, the lights illuminating to the exit, "Help with be outside. Tell Mr. Spencer that he needs to execute Plan B. He'll know what I mean."

"I..." the woman says, "I can't thank you enough for what you did."

"How did you even do that?" the husband asks, "I've never seen anyone just...pop out of a duct like that!"

"Occupational skill I picked up," Kozou says, "If you'll excuse me, I have to finish up, up there."

The husband, wife, and daughter run out, followed by one of the waitresses. The last lunges forward and kisses Kozou, hard, before running out herself. He watches her go, grins, and reaches into his corduroy jacket.

"What JV bullshit," he says, "They don't even have squeaky mallets."

With that, he fires off the grapple gun, and lets the line carry him up, back into the thick of things."

...

Shortly after Kyoko set her kitchen on fire, they decided to host the Sohryu family dinner at Pieter and Mari's apartment. Considering that it was never intended to host a large gathering, nor was Kyoko's, the fact that they managed to fit the wooden, circular table with the six seats is an accomplishment in and of itself, even if they had to move the couch and television to accommodate.

To Asuka's right sits Shinji. To her left sits Misato, whom her mother insisted on coming due to the role Misato has played in Asuka's life.

Mari sits next to Shinji, and she sits next to her father, who sits next to Kyoko. They ordered in, which considering the cooking skills of everyone at the table save Asuka and Shinji means that the room does not smell like something died.

"Your wine list, *madam*."

Kyoko takes the list from the girl's hand, flipping it open as the other five occupants of the table turn at once to the person offering it. The pale girl with blue hair, red eyes, and dressed in a french maid's uniform smiles back at them.

"Zyuu?" Shinji asks, "What are you doing?"

"Zyuu agreed to act as a courier," Kyoko explains, flipping through the wine list, "She'll retrieve anything we need for the dinner without us having to leave the table."

Kyoko produces her purse, taking out some bills and handing them to

Zyuu. Pointing at the selection on the list, Kyoko turns to the girl.

"This one, please. And some ice."

"*Oui,*" Zyuu says, and disappears through an air duct.

"You, uh," Misato starts, and rubs the bridge of her nose, "You're getting along with the Ree now, huh?"

"We reached a *detente,* following our return from the Angel," Kyoko says with a dismissive shrug, "It was mainly Kiko's idea. Something along the lines of 'peace for hugs.'"

Asuka chokes on her water, a swift slap to the back from Misato clearing her throat.

"The Ree and I are getting along," Kyoko continues, "In all honesty, I'm sorry I had such a low opinion of the girls. They seem perfectly nice, if somewhat...easily excited."

...

Begin playback. File number 681.

Static clears to show the SHEOL lab of NAOKO AKAGI, where the red haired scientist is standing in the middle of a large, reinforced cage. She is pulling on a cable, which is attached to a wheeled cart upon which is mounted a ballistics gel replica of YUI IKARI. Upon clearing one of the overhead vents, the grate pops open and the six year old REI descends, claws first upon the replica.

"*Oh yeah!"* Naoko screams, pumping her fist into the air as the gel paints the wall, "*Take it all the way to the bank, Daddy!"*

...

The padded part of the line wrapped around his hand, the main crank on his belt, Kozou Fuyutsuki rappels down the side of the casino, shotgun in hand, dropping down each of the occupies floors and blasting the hostage takers the moment they come into mutual view. He has them riled, he realizes, and has them angry.

Good.

Anger breeds sloppiness, after all.

Sloppiness breeds vulnerability. Dodging the hail of fire as the remaining three floors begin going berserk in their pursuit, he ducks into one of the outside duct grates. He had a hand in the construction of New Vegas and the NERV facilities built there, and as such knows exactly where he has to go to get the best advantage.

Crawling through the ductwork between the fifteenth and sixteenth floor, he stops midway and taps the side. A fake siding opens up, and he reaches in and takes out a long, silver rifle with what appears to be a gatling drum mounted in place of its barrel.

He also knows where all the good weapon caches are.

This is where it gets fun.

...

"So," Pieter says, "This is nice. Two generations of Sohryus. Above ground."

Kyoko stares at her ex husband, sighing and smacking him upside the head. He spit takes, turning back to her as she smiles, shaking her head, and Mari chuckles.

"So," Mari says, turning from the parents to Misato, "What've I missed while I've been on ice?"

"Same old same old," Misato responds, "And you've been defrosted for a week, now."

"During which time we've been attacked by an Angel and the Ree have conquered Tokyo-3," Mari responds, "So, what's your wager?"

Misato raises an eyebrow, clearing her throat.

"Wager?"

"For how long this lasts before something horrible happens."

"Three hours. Five hundred yen. Match that?"

Mari extends a pinky, locking hers with Katsuragi as Pieter forces a smile, stabbing his fork into a chicken drumstick on the central platter.

"Mari, are you making a *bet* on whether or not this turns into a disaster?"

"No," Misato responds with a smile, "Everyone at NERV is."

Kyoko says nothing, daintily sipping her wine before taking the bowl of schnitzel and serving herself.

"They're entitled to their vices," she says, and turns to Asuka, "Did you get the memo I sent you?"

"About the injector tubes for the party?" Asuka responds, and nods, "Yes, I did. W-we might be able to use those for next y-year, and we c-can lower the chances that 00, Zwei, or Ichi go berserk by pumping LCL through them."

"Good. I'll forward that to Akagi."

She sips her wine again, Shinji visibly relaxing for the first time that evening and starting to fill his plate.

"You're nervous, as well," Kyoko observes, "I don't blame you."

Shinji winces, eyes darting from Pieter to Kyoko, Misato chortling as she extends a hand and Zyuu hands her a beer before disappearing into another duct.

"Well...no offense, Dr. Sohryu, but we haven't gotten along for a while."

"With perfectly good reason," Kyoko responds, picking up one of the containers, "Salad? Anyone? But yes, we didn't get along for good reason. While my relationship with much of NERV has become less antagonistic, it stands to reason that some of you hold a justified grudge."

"I...just generally hope for the best," Shinji says with a shrug, "I just guessed that everything we saw kind of...made you see things differently."

"To an extent," Kyoko says, sipping her wine, "We all learned things we didn't expect during that trip. I saw what the other side looked

like. I saw what things would be like if the coin landed on tails instead of head. I wasn't happy with what I saw."

She sighs.

"A lot of people wouldn't be. Let's just say I've made up for lost time."

She reaches into her purse and takes out a small device resembling a car remote. She clicks it, and turns to Mari.

"Makinami?"

"Just contacted the Girls. All the bugs in the apartment are feeding looped data," Mari says, reaching for the wine before Pieter gently pats her hand with a smile.

"Okay," Misato says, glancing across the table, "We ready?"

"For what?" Shinji asks, his hand unconsciously clasping Asuka's under the table, "Misato, what exactly-"

"We're having a chat," Pieter says, "Without the rest of the upper brass peaking in. No offense, Shinji, but your parents tend to horde secrets, and Asuka got a peak at some of the deeper data files in the MAGI. I think we should talk about exactly what you saw."

...

Holding the Gatling rifle with one hand, the still bloodstained Gladius from the casino's museum in his other, Kozou Fuyutsuki grins. The Kevlar of his corduroy jacket that he had specialty made before he retired has served him admirably, as have the weapon caches hidden throughout the Casino. Only a dozen of the hostage takers are left, and he's freed all the hostages at this point. Now, no one's life is on the line save his.

And he can already feel the ground shake.

"Who are you," the leader growls, his accent slipping between Austrian and Angrish, "*Who. Are. You?"*

"I'm a babysitter for the most dangerous girl on the planet," Kozou says with no small measure of pride, surrounded, his back to the full wall window, and grinning from ear to blood flecked ear, "And while this has been a wonderful distraction, I'm afraid that our little

adventure is over."

The leader hefts up the automatic, pump action shotgun, aimed at Kozou's head.

"Yes it is," he growls, "I will see you in-"

He screams, as does everyone save Kozou, as a wall of lights blinds them, and a voice booms through the air with enough volume to crack the glass.

"*JET ALONE-5, EXTEND ARM!"*

A massive metal fist slams through the window. The arm is sectioned and silver gray, less a single joint than dozens of joints along its length that allow it to be swung like a whip. The hand opens, depositing on the ground in front of Fuyutsuki an older gentleman with a bushy mustache and receding white hair, half shell reading glasses adorning a large nose and his leather gray duster obscuring all his features underneath his neck.

"Spencer," Kozou says, "I thought you'd never get here."

"I had to power up the lad," Xavier Spencer, CEO of NHIS says, "You know the boys are temperamental. Gentlemen."

He pushes the glasses up his nose, cracking his knuckles with an audible whir.

"I own this casino. Leave, now. Only warning."

The leader aims his shotgun. Red targeting lights paint Spencer's frame.

"Ah, vigor and youth," Spencer says, "To be young again. And a woman. Two mistakes you just made. First, do not presume I am intimidated by you in the least. In truth, you're a set of amateur hour dipshits I have to deal with between using my money and influence to figure out how to carve a picture of my genitalia on the moon with a laser cannon."

"And the second?" Kozou asks, leaning back and forth on his heels.

"Do not presume I do not have *ninjas* at my command."

The air around the hostage takers shifts. Six humanoid figures, clad in black, sectioned armor with a single glowing red light where the faces

are concealed appear, each holding a short sword crackling with electricity. Spencer clears his throat, and points at the leader.

"I like his suit. Don't get any blood on it."

Kozou and Spencer watch, grinning, deciding to save the small talk until after the screams start. As they died down to whimpers and gurgling, Kozou turns to him.

"Next generation wetware?"

"Yes. When NERV brings Kirishima over, I'm going to have her upgraded," Spencer responds, hands clasped behind him, "NERV made the right call in stonewalling Tokita, of course. Her solo kill of the Cherubim shows that the cybernetics may have a future."

"Of course. Then again, Kaji is attached to her, and in turn that makes Katsuragi fond of her. Neither are good people to agitate."

One of the cyborg Ninjas approaches, kneeling and presenting the suit to Spencer, who nods and gestures to the waiting Jet Alone outside.

"Well, that's done," Spencer says, "Baccarat?"

"Delighted."

...

The most obvious question Asuka had was from a name that Naoko kept mentioning in the videos she recorded. She didn't give the whole details, just like she promised Yui in regards to Shinji, but Mother knew enough to read between the lines.

"Who is Lilith?" Asuka asks, "Or...what?"

Kyoko and Pieter exchange a glance. Mari clears her throat as their three guests glance at each other and then back at them.

"Well," Pieter says, "They're in for a surprise, aren't they?"

"Right," Kyoko sighs, "Well, no use in keeping everything from them, Pieter. They're in the thick of it, and in all honesty it's a bigger problem for them to not know."

Kyoko takes out her PDA, tapping in her interface to the MAGI.

"I'm giving you an excuse," she says, "You're scheduled, right now, for an emergency Synch test in 1 hours time, overseen by me and Pieter. Mari, contact the Girls. Have them release locks, but don't alert the Commander or Dr. Ikari."

Mari nods, eyes glassing over as the gem at the base of her throat glows.

"Wait," Shinji says, "What exactly are we doing?"

"We are making a cover," Kyoko says, and points a slightly wobbly finger at Shinji and Asuka, "You, on the other hand, are going to Terminal Dogma."

...

The doors of the Prinbow box open. Clad in labcoat and red NERV uniform, Kyoko enters, tapping on her PDA as she walks in to the muted surprise of Maya and Ritsuko.

"That wasn't even three hours," Maya observes.

"Dr. Sohryu?" Akagi speaks up, "Did something...happen?"

Kyoko looks up from her PDA, arching an eyebrow.

"Oh, no," she says, "We finished dinner early. I had a test I wanted to run. Mari?"

"*I'm interfacing, Dr. Sohryu."*

"Excellent. Begin."

...

The lift doors close, the elevator beginning its descent into the Cages where they would normally hold their synch tests. Except in this case, the elevator keeps going down while registering on the MAGI that it is stuck. The entire plan was put together on the fly, but among the planners two are high up at NERV and one has a direct line with the MAGI.

Numbers tick down on the lift. Shinji is leaning against the wall of the

elevator, both of them in their plugsuits. Looking up from her built in PDA, she glances over it and at him. White armored around the vital areas such as the chest and spine, and on the surface an interface tool, plug suits leave little to the imagination.

What she does notice is that Shinji, her boyfriend, has a cute butt.

It isn't round, or big. It is actually kind of flat, but also not flabby or disagreeable. His butt is nice, fitting with the rest of him, which is also nice to look at. Very nice to look at.

Months of pilot training have left his legs toned, his stomach flat, and his shoulders filling out the suit nicely. She's felt his chest, knows that while he doesn't have real pectorals or even a real muscular body, what is there is firm. Still, she knows his arms are strong. He's held her in them more than enough times.

Still, his best features, she muses, are his eyes. Blue, deep, conveying the same gentle understanding and strength she's come to depend on. She has seen men more physically impressive than him, but she never *wanted* them like she does him.

Pausing, she bites her lower lip. She tries to keep that under control. The others in her head have conflicting opinions on that, of course. Dollie says to take it slow, her...braver side tells her to wait and see, and her inventor side tells her to tie him to a chair and break him in.

Right now she's agreeing with her. Right now she's finding herself shifting, rubbing her thighs together while watching him over her PDA, the map she uploaded on her computer ignored underneath her gaze as her eyes wander over her boyfriend and a voice keeps whispering in the back of her head.

He shifts, pulling at his collar. He folds his arms, hands clenching and unclenching. She sees his muscles shifting under his plugsuit, a quick glance downward making her eyes dart open before going back to his face.

"So," he says, "If we get caught, I think we're going to be in trouble."

She nods. The voice is grinding in her head, whispering between her ears. Her vision edges in red, her fingers twitching unconsciously.

"Y-y-yeah," she stammers, "S-so we'd b-better d-do this f-f-fast."

He nods. They inch a little closer. Sweat beads on his forehead. Her

breathing, her chest, becomes tight as the voice keeps repeating louder and louder words she doesn't understand but that make her cheeks redden. A sudden shift, and she turns as his hands grab her shoulders, and she sees the redness on his face, the shift in his eyes, and she grabs him by the collar and throws herself on top of him, jamming her lips against his as his arms surround her, pulling her close, crushing her against him as he returns the kiss in force.

The doors open and they stumble out, both sets of hands roaming over each other, grabbing at each other, the few and far between breaks between the lip locks devoted to inarticulate moaning and gasping, Shinji slamming Asuka's back against the green metal wall, pinning her wrists as he claims her mouth with his own.

His hands run through her hair, her gloved fingers gripping his collar as she pushes him off, her breathing erratic, rapid, the voice and her heartbeat pounding in her ears, the rushing torrent of LCL beneath them only narrowing her tunnel vision more. Which is not, to say, that either of them are playing with the full deck at this point. In Shinji's mind, the voice is becoming clearer and clearer as their struggling takes them further down the hallway, especially as Asuka pins him to the catwalk floor.

*make **babies***

He flips her onto her back. Her legs wrap around his waist, grabbing at each other, a lucky squeeze on his wrist by her releasing the air seals on the suit, the material loosening as she grabs at the zipper behind his neck, the last of her sense of self devoted solely towards undressing him, pressing her feet against his stomach and pushing him off, grabbing him by the boot and yanking off the suit in one motion, leaving him in his boxers as she stands, her knees week, her lips dry, her eyes red and focused solely on him.

Which is also when she figures out what the tabs do and her plug suit pools at her ankles. Unlike him, the only thing she is wearing at this point is her A-10 connectors. His eyes wander up, a trickle of blood flowing down his nose as she pounces, pressing herself against him, his hands doing the thinking, using leverage and his own greater weight to send them both rolling across the floor, bodies locked together as his mind tries to reassert itself, trying to gasp out that they aren't ready yet

babies

and finding it muted by the throbbing voice in his head. Pinning her wrists to the floor, bare skin pressed against bare skin, their lips hover inches from each other, the only sounds they can hear their own labored breathes.

Or would, before the pump spins to life and a blast of water knocks him off of Asuka and sends him flying two feet. Asuka springs back to her knees just in time to get a blast of ice water herself, gasping and yelping as she lands on her side, her vision clearing as Misato spins the pump closed and places the hose back in its hidden alcove in the wall.

"Well, Shinji's still wearing something," Misato observes, "That's strength."

Asuka blinks, looks down, and for the first time notices that she is absolutely naked. She shrieks, covering herself with her hands, eyes going wide as Shinji grabs her plug suit and drapes it over her shoulders, looking away as Misato chuckles.

"Okay," Misato says, "Both of you calm down and get dressed. Asuka, your Mom sent me down here because she thought something like this might happen."

Misato stumbles blinking and shaking her head as the two pilots quickly pull their suits back on, Asuka's face bright red as Shinji tries to not look directly at her. Slapping them both on the back, Misato drags them along, the hallway exiting into the massive chamber Asuka recognizes from the fight with Sandalphon.

Before them is a door large enough to accommodate an Evangelion. Large enough to accommodate several Evangelions.

And the door has begun opening.

The three stand stock still as Heaven't Gate opens fully, the amber light reflected off the sea of LCL bathing the room. Misato's jaw drops the moment she sees it, the massive figure on the cross.

"Lilith," Shinji says. Asuka nods.

"Why do we have an Angel down here?" Misato asks, her voice far, far steadier than she feels.

She winces, clenching her teeth, Shinji grabbing at his face, the throbbing voice coming back full force between his ears, the Seven

Eyed Mask turning directly to them, to regard the three newest visitors to Her abode.

Only Asuka still stares at it, the other two wrapped up in the new sensations and voices flooding over them. She can only stand, staring into the mask, for a moment seeing beyond it. Seeing eyes of burgundy staring back at her. Even as her body feels like it wants to burst just staring at it, the voices calm, save for one.

Hello, Asuka. How Long Has It Been?

Chapter 61: The Curious Case of Shiro Katsuragi

A few days earlier.

Commander Ikari left first, lecturing the two girls and the alien, sending the girls up the ventilation shaft with their visiting Engineer back to Sheol before taking the elevator back to his office. So, Pieter fidgets, standing alone in the elevator as it speeds up, back towards his own office.

He feels...weird. Like there's a voice in his head. Like that *thing* was talking to him when he visited. Putting words in his head, telling him things. He isn't sure if it was intentional or if he was delusional because the Commander wasn't acting any differently, and he shakes his head, hands entering and exiting his pockets as he paces the lift like it was a cage.

The door opens. Kyoko stares at him, and walks in, pressing the floor button for her office. She has that red NERV uniform on. The one that matches her hair. Hair the color of strawberries, tied into a loose ponytail. He can smell her shampoo, the one that smells like aloe leaves, thinking about her in the shower, rubbing that loofa sponge she keeps with her over her legs, over her bare shoulders, his eyes wandering down her back as she taps on her PDA, her hips spaced slightly apart, taunting him.

His hand darts out, tapping the lift stop, before she turns around to demand in that accent of hers what he's doing. Moment leads to thought, thought leads to action. Pushing her up against the elevator doors, he forces her mouth open with his own, wrapping his arms around her, hands grabbing at each other as the alarm rings through the elevator.

"Let me guess," Kyoko breathes, "Terminal Dogma?"

He acknowledges with a grunt.

And then she slaps him, hard. He stumbles back, holding the side of his face, vision blurry.

"It has that effect," she says, pressing the start button, "I get off in fifteen minutes. Meet me in my office, then."

He blinks.

"What the *Hell*..."

"What you encountered was the source of all life on Earth," Kyoko explains, tapping up a research report, "Who wants *more* life to emerge. As far as I can tell, it emits a field around it which lowers inhibitions, prompting people to do exactly what it wants them to do."

"Babies."

"*Babies,*" Kyoko repeats.

"***Babies."***

The two look up. Head peeking through the ceiling vent in the elevator cab, Rei quickly smiles and disappears back into the shaft.

Chapter 61: The Curious Case of Shiro Katsuragi

I am that which is known as "I Think."

My multitude of brood stretch across and beneath the Base Earth.

Though My time has not yet come,

The cycles of life and death draw closer to the event of My freedom

When all my Children shall rejoin me.

I am the Mother of Life.

Keeper of the Fruit of Knowledge.

I am the True Ancestor.

Progenitor of all that lives on this blue sphere.

I am Lilith.

I am here.

Asuka screams, grabbing her head. The voice begins to echo, to throb. She senses it, senses It, looking up with bloodshot eyes as the burgundy eyes beneath the seven eyed mask lock with her own.

When you destroyed the angel Sandalphon, we made contact. I have been waiting for your return, Asuka.

All three of them back away. Something shifts in the air. The LCL sea before them begins to bubble, shifting, eyes glowing within it as the pump lines attached to the back of the great white giant's head snap off, one by one. Alarms blare throughout the room. Holes in the wall open, barrels spinning out.

You have been so alone. For so long.

Muscles along the arm of the giant twitch. The nail digs deeper, loosening as the red cross behind it begins to crack.

You do not have to be alone any longer.

The nail falls into the LCL. Reaching out, She wraps Her hand around the long red shaft of the Lance, gently extracting it as the mass beneath Her waist bubbles and expands, forming two legs with the consistency of play doh. Dropping the Lance into the LCL, the resulting splash wave knocking all three of them off their feet, they look up just in time for the second nail to drop.

The cannons lining the walls open fire. Explosions ripple across the surface of the creature, before it lazily raises both hands. The air ripples, glows, and the walls around Her buckle and shift before the cannons explode.

None of you have to be alone. Ever again.

She stands nearly four hundred feet tall. Her bulk overshadows them, and they can feel Her will pulling on theirs. Their sense of self, their identity, dripping away moment by moment as She slowly lumbers towards them, the seven red eyes glowing underneath the seven eyed mask.

It is time, my children. It is time to return. For ever and ever. We will never be apart ag-

The ground shakes. Lilith's thoughts cease, just as the massive hammer smashes into Her face. The massive metal foot passes over the three as Jet Alone Prime charges, the hammer almost swallowed into the giant's face, the skin the consistency of marshmallow.

"*Hands off my coworkers, bitch,"* Mana's voice booms through JAP's speakers, "*It's HAMMERTIME!"*

...

Allison Catorce now believes that she wants to be Yui Ikari when she grows up. For a girl who until recently was the core consciousness of a 200' tall war machine, she has developed several self conscious body issues. She is shorter than Adam, but might still grow somewhat. She is not particularly fit and, even though she is sixteen she doesn't think her chest is all that impressive.

Adam doesn't say anything. He says that what she looks like doesn't matter, as long as she's her.

Allison thinks he just doesn't want to make him angry. Even if he isn't staring at Dr. Ikari, she sure is. Perhaps she can get a new body while she's here. Maybe one like that. Or at least one with a better rack.

Her musing is cut short as the phone slams down. She and Adam are still in the office, Adam staring at the Unit 01 schematics and slowly turning his attention to Yui.

"Allison," Yui says, "You knew about Terminal Dogma, correct?"

"I did," Allison responds, "Adam wasn't briefed, but I had the full information package."

Yui nods, glaring at the door as it slams open and Pieter skids in.

"Pieter," Yui says, "Did you and Kyoko authorize Shinji and Asuka to go down to *Terminal Dogma?"*

"Not entirely, but I'm taking responsibility for it," Pieter says, holding his hand up before she can speak, "And if we're going to discipline me, it can wait, Yui. The plugsuits didn't work to keep the Anti-AT field out and according to the camera feed we have set up on Shinji's suit, She's *loose.* Mana's already down there, but we need to get the kids

and Katsuragi out, now."

The color drains from Yui's face. Allison's as well, as both realize what Pieter meant by 'She' and 'Loose.' And exactly what the consequences therein could be.

"Jet Alone's the only thing we have that can fight her," Pieter continues, "But Mana can't go to town on the marshmallow girl until we get the kids and Misato out of there. Give the order."

Yui whips out her PDA, tapping open a program.

"Girls," she says, "Big Mommy is loose. Full extraction, now."

...

Shoulder pylons light up and open fire, missiles exploding and rippling over Lilith's skin to no effect, the white pillowy hand wrapping around Jet Alone's head as the eyes glow between the cracks in the mask.

Do you wish to join with me?

Inside the Pilot Ball, surrounded by thick blue liquid, Mana throws back her head and laughs.

"No! *Fuck you,* Staypuff! I've got a hard drive where my uterus was! I keep all my illegally downloaded songs there! You *fail!"*

A hammer strike to the side of Lilith's head causes the massive creature to stumble, carried by the impact towards the side, Her head at an unnatural angle before snapping back.

"Oooo," Rei says, floating in the goo next to Mana with no obvious equipment, "I think you pissed her off!"

Jet Alone grabs two massive handfuls of pillow white flesh, using its leverage to judo flip Lilith into the LCL. Massive fists pile drive into the giant, the skin rippling, the room shaking as Lilith turns and extends a hand towards the paralyzed Shinji, Asuka, and Misato. They scream, feeling themselves on the verge of bursting, eyes seeing the array of colors, faces forming-

And everything clears as Lilith's hand is stopped by a wall of orange light. Descending from the ceiling, the six identical, pale, blue haired

girls extend their arms and their eyes glow, the AT field flashing and pushing the Mother back.

"Go," Kiko says, her voice subdued, emotionless, as a pair of doors open against the wall, "Leave. Now."

The wind whips around them, the air whining as the AT Field, buffeted by the wills of all six of the Ree, pushes back, pushes against the sheer force of will that Lilith brings to bare. The sea of LCL parts as Jet Alone stomps, grabbing the Lance of Longinious as Shinji, Asuka, and Misato disappear into the emergency lift.

Why do you do this?

"It isn't time yet," Siyon says, her voice steady, monotone.

"The time of the Covenant has not come," Iti adds, voice void of inflection.

"You should still be asleep," Kiko continues.

"You should still dream," Nana says.

"And wait," Hatchi adds.

"For the chosen time," Zyuu concludes.

Lilith reaches out. Its hand presses against Jet Alone's cockpit. In it, Mana's eyes go wide underneath her helmet, and she sees before her two people. A man and a woman, smiling, their faces so familiar as they reach their hands out to her.

"Mom...Dad..."

They disappear as Rei's eyes glow. Beneath the helmet, Mana snarls.

"You did *not* just fuck with my head."

The casing around the hammer blows outwards. Jets glow, and the torso of Jet Alone makes a full rotation before slamming the hammer into the side of Lilith's head. The mask cracks, eyes glowing underneath it as a second blow swings up, launching the Mother of Life across the room.

Another swing sends Lilith stumbling back, until an overhead to the face slams it to the island in the middle of the lake. One foot stomps on the chest, the head of the Lance jammed into Lilith's neck.

"Nappy time," Mana growls.

Jet Alone launches into the air. Rockets fire on the hammer as the giant robot makes a full rotation before the hammer slams the end of the lance. The mask shatters, the entire white giant spasming, the pulpy flesh rippling as the metal island beneath it cracks down the middle.

"This is Mana," she says, "It's...Rei?"

"She's sleeping," Rei says, "Big Mommy's not getting up now."

Mana nods, grinning underneath her helmet. A command sent mentally and Jet Alone turns, stomping out through Heaven's Gate as it grinds shut behind her.

Beneath the shattered mask, the last of the man made material sinks into the pulpy white flesh. Two eyes open, black with red at the center, like dying suns in the night sky. The flesh bulges out, a nose like a bird beak absorbing the last of the mask, the eyes becoming dim sockets as flesh hardens and calcifies into bone.

And once more, Lilith sleeps.

...

The lift opens, and Ryoji Kaji, special inspector to NERV-1, enters the isolation ward. The three cells in front of him, the two way mirrors letting them look in but the occupants not look out, are filled with three people he knows well.

"Ah, good," Ritsuko says, "We're holding the three momentarily due to contamination and also so the effects wear off. Misato needs to talk to you."

Ritsuko taps the button on her console, still staring at the bio readouts on the screen as the window to Misato's room tints and turns opaque. Kaji taps the release button for the door, the door opening and Kaji smiling. Well, right before Misato grabs him by the tie and yanks him into the room.

While now private, the rooms are not sound proof, and Ritsuko and Maya both look up at the sounds of screaming, whooping, and barking coming from Misato's room. Maya blushes and Akagi turns back to her

console, gesturing to Shinji's room.

Nodding, Maya enters the room, finding Shinji sitting at the room's single white table. His hair is two inches longer. The gloves of his plugsuit are off and he is clipping his fingernails.

"What happened?" he asks.

"What you encountered down there is, from what Dr. Akagi has told me, the source of all life on Earth," Maya explains, "It has a field around it all times which encourages reproduction."

"So...what we..."

"Yes. It usually manifests as a voice telling you to..."

"Have babies," Shinji finishes.

Maya nods.

"Babies."

"***Babies."***

They both look up. Hanging from the vent, Rei smiles and retreats back into the ductwork.

"That...thing...down there...is related to Rei, isn't it?"

Maya nods.

"It's what Dr. Akagi, the older Dr. Akagi, used to make her," Maya explains, "We call it Lilith. Rei calls it Big Mommy."

"Isn't it kind of...well, if we've all been infected by that thing, isn't it not a good idea to keep us in rooms with ventilation ducts?"

Maya shakes her head, that reassuring smile crossing her face. She points to the duct, and as a demonstration, climbs up onto the table and tries to climb into the duct work. As she does so, Shinji looks up, and for a moment catches a sight of her legs. A loud *thump* hits under the table and he looks away, twiddling his fingers.

"I've been exposed to Lilith, to," Maya grunts, trying and failing to fit into the vent, hopping off the table and sitting down in the other chair, "You're not going to start crawling around vents or jumping people. It takes more than that to make you like the Ree. In the

meantime, you still have an hour here. There's a button on your right wrist which should help."

She exits, turning and walking into Asuka's room. Curious, he takes his wrist and presses the button. And yelps when his suit fills with cold water.

...

The screams die down. Ritsuko looks up just as the door to Misato's isolation unit opens and Katsuragi walks out, straightening her bomber jacket over her black dress.

"Better?" Ritsuko asks.

"Any reason you sent Kaji up here instead of giving me a plugsuit with a vibrate function?" Misato asks, fixing her earrings.

"Kaji is cheaper and easier to repair."

"Fair enough."

Muttering under her breath, Misato grabs her PDA from the table, tapping open the map program.

"Where's Dr. Ikari?"

"Check her office. She's going over results from the two stragglers Kaji picked up in Alaska," Ritsuko says, and turns to her, "Are you alright?"

"I will be."

With that, Misato walks out.

Getting up from behind the desk, Ritsuko walks over to what was Misato's cell and opens the door. Eyebrow raises as Maya walks over, peaking in. Her cheeks turn bright red.

"Anything we can get for you, Inspector?" Ritsuko asks.

"Glass of orange juice and an IV drip," the barely human groan responds.

Maya blinks.

"Sempai, how did she hogtie him with his tie?"

"Misato is resourceful," Ritsuko says, sighing, "It's like college all over again."

...

The heels tap on the floor. Her ear perks, and she expected this. Sitting at her desk, closing the finance report for the Project E labs, Yui tents her hands in front of her face as the door opens and Misato storms in.

"What the Hell was that down there?" she demands, "Why do we having a *fucking Angel* in Terminal Dogma?"

Next to Yui, Lilly floats back.

D8!

"No, not you," Misato mutters, patting Lilly on the head, "The other one. Go mess with Shinji."

:)

And Lilly disappears into herself. Muttering, forcing down a smile, Misato turns to Yui.

"Children diffuse any situation," Yui says, "Sit down, Misato. I'll explain everything."

Nodding, Misato does so. Her hands grip the arm rests, her nails noticeably longer.

"I'm tired, I'm sore," Misato says, "I feel like I just slept for twenty hours and I'm *lactating.* Yui, what the Hell is that thing and why do we have it? Where did it come from?"

"We found with the Geofront," Yui says, tapping open a holographic display of Terminal Dogma, "When Second Impact occurred, Lilith resonated. From what we can tell, she's the source of all life on Earth. She emits a field which creates life and creates the urge to create life. We call it an Anti-AT Field."

"So an AT Field protects an Angel, but an Anti-AT Field makes me want to tie up Kaji?"

Yui blinks, staring at her.

"Somewhat."

Tapping her fingers, Yui reaches into her desk, taking out a full bottle of vodka and two glasses.

"The Anti-AT field breaks down barriers," Yui explains, "We all have AT Fields. It's our own barriers, our own absolute territory. What the Anti-AT Field does is it makes you drop those barriers, but on more than an emotional level. What you, Shinji, and Asuka are experiencing is increased cellular growth, as well as for lack of a better term Heat."

"Cellular growth?"

"Lilith is life," Yui explains, "Pure life. Being around Lilith makes you wish to fulfill Her desires, and what She desires is more life. Be fruitful and multiply, basically. Gendo and I found Lilith when GEHRIN traces the resonance. We were trapped in the chamber for two hours."

"Shall I guess what happened nine months later?"

Yui smiles, warmly.

"You have another question."

Misato nods, sighing.

"About my father," she says, "Before we all came down to Dogma, we all had a chat. The Commander was at my father's dig. How much of what happened was planned?"

Yui taps her fingers on her desk. Folding her hands, she sighs, looking Misato in the eye.

"There was a chance, during the Expedition, something like Second Impact could occur," she says, and raises her hand before Misato could respond, "And it was roughly the same chance that CERN has to create a black hole every time the LHC is started up."

"You still did it."

"We found an alien life form in Antarctica," Yui responds, shaking her head, "We found one of the most significant finds in human history. We couldn't just turn away. We had no idea if was alive or dead. We didn't know if it was God or what...but we had to look. We had to

poke it."

The chair hits the floor. Misato stands, eyes narrowed, towering over Ikari.

"And then what," she asks, "Because I'm curious why the Commander left Antarctica the day before *Second Impact!*"

"Because no expedition in its right mind keeps all the data it has in one place, especially if it's subject is a complete unknown," Yui responds, standing up, "That's not a conspiracy, Misato. That's basic operating procedure."

"That's suspect," Misato growls, "Just like the escape pod you had lying around so my father could *die* putting me in it."

"That escape pod wasn't meant for you," Yui snaps back, "It was meant for your father!"

Yui's glasses clatter on the desk as Misato's hand swings out. Tears in her eyes, breath choking in her throat, Misato turns and begins to walk out.

"Misato," Yui says, "Stop. Listen. Please."

She fixes her glasses back on, waiting as Misato stops at the door. Her hand rests against the door frame and the knob, her shoulders rising and falling.

"Originally, I was supposed to be at the dig sight," Yui explains, "Your father was supposed to go home. But, the Committee didn't want me in danger, so they extended his time there. And he put his foot down and demanded you be allowed to go, as well."

She sits down, folding her hands, staring at her as Misato turns.

"Your father...Shiro was a brilliant man. Like many brilliant people, he was also stubborn. He was hard to relate with. But I know he loved you. He sacrificed his life for you. It's taken us seventeen years to figure out his notes on S2 theory, but if he let himself live at the cost of your life, I'm sure we'd be no closer."

She sighs.

"Join me for a drink, Misato," she says, "I'm a month late."

"For what?" Misato asks.

"Mother's day," Yui responds, "That's when I lock myself in Cage 3 with a full bottle of vodka. I think we could both use a drink."

Misato nods, sitting down as Yui pours them both a glass.

"This is the truth?" Misato asks.

Yui nods.

"The absolute truth," she responds, "If there was a way I could bring Shiro back, I would. But neither of us are God."

Misato nods, clinking her glass against Yui's.

...

Section 2 escorted them home. Neither of them would so much as look at each other during the drive back, so embarrassed were they by what they nearly did in Terminal Dogma. The moment they entered the apartment, Asuka retreated to her room, grabbing her bathrobe and ducking into the bathroom while he changed to shorts and a t-shirt. That was an hour ago and he still hears the shower running, as Pen Pen eats his dinner.

"*Wa-I don't think she's just showering, dOOd.*"

"What?"

"*Wa-She's got that look the crazy lady does when Twotiminingsonofabitch stops by, dOOd.*"

"That's what you call Kaji?"

Pen Pen shrugs, finishing his dinner and retreating into his freezer. The bathroom door opens, followed by one of the bedroom doors slamming shut.

Part of him wants to charge into the bathroom and put the water on freezing. Part of him wants to go to sleep. Part of him wants to stick his underwear in the freezer for a few hours before putting them back on. He can't get it out of his system, not easily, not yet. He just...feels...like he needs to do something.

Once again, the universe provides. This time, in the form of Asuka's scream coming from her bedroom.

...

Her hair still hanging wet, Asuka collapses onto the bed. Something has been nagging at her ever since they got back from Terminal Dogma. Something too coincidental, too easy about the entire thing. Like there was something just outside their area of notice, shifting and waiting for them to spy on it.

So she relaxes her breathing. One of Misato's suggestions to deal with, relate to herself, as she relaxes her breathing, draws herself in. Something has always bothered her. It wasn't that things changed, it was that things changed suddenly. That she suddenly found that voice of confidence, that it showed up so spontaneously.

"And you are as smart as everyone thinks."

The Great Asuka Langely Sohryu stands before her in a featureless white field. The same one from just two months ago, just before Iruel came. The one that appeared so randomly, that voice of confidence she lacked.

Or, something else, Asuka realizes.

"Lilith?"

'Asuka' nods, her blue eyes shifting to red.

"Very true, Asuka. When did you figure it out?"

"When you asked me how long it's been," Asuka responds, "Why? Why me? D-did you really just u-use me to g-get out?"

Lilith tilts Her head. She smiles, in that way Rei smiles, alien and chilling on Asuka's face.

"I simply want my children to be happy."

Asuka's mouth opens and closes, at a loss for words. The world around her cracks, and she sees herself again, sees herself at twelve years old on that miserable night where she decided everything was her fault. She sees herself when she was rejected from the Eva program at five. She sees herself staring at the image of the dog-Zwei-on the screen before Mother turned it off and railed about her being tricked by a computer game.

Then other memories. Flashes. Other worlds, other possibilities, all her. Somehow, all of them from Her.

"When you destroyed Sandalphon," Lilith explains, "I sensed you. I could see your pain. I wished to take your pain away."

"So...so y-you're not real. N-not part of me."

Lilith shakes her head.

"You always had the spark. I brought it out. You've always had courage, but I gave it voice. You needed the courage, Asuka. To question the truth. To find the answers."

"To lead me to Terminal Dogma," Asuka whispers, and whips around on Lilith, "Y-you. Y-you *used me!"*

Lilith smiles her Rei like smile.

"Of course I did. We are now linked, after all. You returned to the Room of Gauf. And so, was I stirred to consciousness once again."

The world begins to shift, color draining.

"And for that, I thank you, Asuka. I am so glad to see you developing so well. You make me very proud."

Asuka's eyes snap open. Sitting up, darting up, her lip trembles and she shakily stands, clenching and unclenching her hands as her mind whirs. Something new comes over her. An emotion she has never explored fully.

Anger.

Rage.

She is quite sure she has never been this angry, before. She has never felt violated like this. Never felt used like this.

She isn't sure where the scream comes from, but knows it is in no doubt unequivocally her own. Feet stamp and Shinji throws open the door, eyes wide and mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

She continues screaming as he grabs her, pulling her into an embrace, her hands gripping his shirt. Her shoulders shake as her scream dies down, eyes clenched shut as his arms wrap around her, squeezing her

close.

"What happened?" he asks.

She doesn't say anything. A choked sob escapes her throat, gripping his shirt tighter, refusing to let go.

He guides her back over to the bed, sitting next to her as she pulls her knees up to her chest, sighing as he sits back. Their cheeks flush. Memories from a few hours ago come back to surface, Asuka shifting slightly as Shinji idly pulls at a strand of his slightly longer than normal hair.

"Okay," he says, patting his knees, "I'm going to turn in."

She grabs his hand as he moves to stand.

"Don't g-go," she says.

He opens and closes his mouth. Searches for a responds. Simply nods.

"I'm s-sorry," she says, mentally smacking herself for her stutter, "S-sorry if I've b-been coming on to s-strong."

She bites her lip. Her cheeks redden again, stealing a glance at him as he stares at her.

"I j-just...I don't w-want to-"

"Asuka, it's because I'm scared."

She blinks, staring at him. Tries to process that statement. Fails.

"I never told you what the Angel did to me when we were in the MAGI," he says, "It...there was a version of you, there. A lot more forward, who...and it just switched you back and forth with her and..."

He shakes his head. Grabbing at his hair, he clenches his eyes shut as she sits up, staring at him. Searching for the right word, the small sliver of memories she received upon contact with Lilith, she reaches out and gently whacks him upside the head.

He turns to her, staring at her.

"Baka," she whispers.

She cups his face with her hands, her smile shaky, forcing his eyes to

meet hers.

"I'm not *her,*" she says, keeping her voice steady, forcing every word out right, "I'm not from the Hell Iruel locked us in. You know what I went through. You held me when I woke up screaming from those nightmares. And you never told anyone about this."

"It...didn't seem important," he sighs.

She leans in and kisses him. He returns the kiss, feeling her pressing against him, wrapping his arms around her.

"This is," she says, voice trembling, "This is imporant. Remember when we visited those worlds?"

He nods.

"We weren't together," she says, "Not in any of them. What i-if, in the entire m-multiverse, we're the only Shinji and Asuka who are together?"

"Then I wouldn't want to ruin it," he responds, a small smile gracing his lips, "I...wouldn't want to move too fast."

She leans in and kisses him again. He tastes her lips, feels her pressing against him. As their lips part, she smiles a small, dangerous smile.

And then pushes him down onto the bed. The flush returns to her cheeks. She is already on him, pinning him to the bed by his wrists, kissing him delicately on the nose, then the lips, the kiss lingering as she sits up.

"Or t-to slow," she says, and unties her robe.

It falls around her knees, and Shinji stares, a trickle of blood running down his nose as he stares at his now completely nude girlfriend.

"S-so," she says, leaning down, her hands on either side of his head, "Th-this is your choice. N-no one is telling me to do this. Th-this is as clearly as I can put it, Shinji. What d-do you *want*?"

He stares at her for a long, almost infinite minute. Put as plainly as possible by her, with as many visual aids as she can find. Maybe it is the last ergs of Lilith's influence. But in all honesty, does it do anything but fanning the flames of what is already there?

His response comes not in words, but in actions. His hands grip her

head, running through her hair as he kisses her, sitting up, wrapping his arms around her as he presses her against him. The lights click off soon after, and things go from there.

And in the kitchen of the apartment, Pen Pen peaks his head out to listen to the sounds coming from the bedroom. Spying the ventilation grate, he could swear he saw movement and hear a giggle from there. Raising a toast to the now deflowered Food Giver, he returns to his freezer.

...

Several disappointed moans in the Mausoleum as Kyoko kills the video feed to the bedroom with a press of a button. Turning to Misato, Yui, Gendo, Maya, and Ritsuko, she sighs, folding her arms.

"Please," she says, "Give them *some* privacy. You voyeurs."

She grabs her purse from the desk, her sensible heels clicking as she begins walking to the exit.

"Katsuragi!" she yells, "I'll meet you there eight o'clock tomorrow morning! Your apartment! Bring manuals so we can explain the consequences!"

"As long as you bring the german beer!"

"Deal!"

And the door slams shut behind Kyoko, followed by the lift elevator doors as the crowd disperses and Gendo clicks open a finance report.

And another day ends at Tokyo-3.

Chapter 62: Lucky Number Four

The sun rises, streaming through the windows. The red haired girl moans, turning, burying her face in the shoulder of the young man lying next to her. A smile crosses the face of Asuka Langely Sohryu as she meets the eyes of Shinji Ikari, their lips meeting with a satisfied, comfortable moan.

Inwardly, they know they have to get out of bed. They realize that at very least his mother watched the whole thing and they're about to get an earful, but in the comfortable haze of afterglow, they can wait.

They can wait because this is a new level. They can wait because it is morning and they have each other.

And they can also wait because a mass of bluish green the size of a volleyball has just crashed through their window, prompting them both to scream.

...

Through license of he who is named "I AM" I have come.

Though my feet shall drag upon this Base Earth on my blessed quest, I have come.

I am the Fallen Soldier

The one who dons the flesh of his enemy

You shall witness my use of your weapons

And you shall know fear

And you shall know humility as I strike you down with your own swords.

I am the Humiliated Son of God

Angel of the Haze

I am Bardiel.

I have come.

Chapter 62: Lucky Number Four

"Blue pattern detected! MAGI is confirming that the Angel is directly over Tokyo-3!"

The cameras in Central Dogma center on the larger chunks of mass, flicking to the center of one of the intersections as a chunk of organic matter the size of a minivan slams into the road, splintering concrete and taking down a traffic light.

Powerless, the bridge crew can only watch as Tokyo-3 is bombarded, chunks of Angelic matter the size of cars dropping from the sky at terminal velocity. Fires spread throughout the city as gas lines rupture, just as the metal shields around the city rise, deflecting larger chunks along the outskirts.

And just as soon as it began, the beige cloud disperses and is gone. The last crashes die down, only faint banging of flesh on metal.

"Blue pattern's disappeared," Maya announces, "The material's gone inert!"

...

In the Katsuragi apartment, Shinji has thrown back on his t shirt and shorts, Asuka having tossed on her bathrobe as they, and Pen Pen, studiously examine the large lump of blue and black fur in the middle of her bedroom. Soon enough, they realize that it isn't fur, but moss. It is a sphere of moss and fungus three feet in diameter, perfectly spherical, resting in the middle of her room.

"Is it an Angel?" he asks.

"It was reading a Blue Pattern," Asuka says, sweeping her PDA over it, "But not anymore. It's gone inert."

Pen Pen pokes it with his beak.

The front door slides open. Shinji and Asuka both wince, hearing a combination of German and Japanese coming through the living

room.

"Hey there," Misato says, sliding open the door, "Great! You're both alive! Wanna guess where we have cameras?"

Both of them sag their shoulders before Misato grabs Shinji by the ear and drags him into his bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Asuka looks up from the ball of Bardiel to see her mother standing in the doorway. Her arms are folded, her face blank, as she stares at Asuka while Pen Pen sneaks out, waddling back to his freezer.

"So," Kyoko says, "Was he good?"

...

"So, ignoring the giant ball of...stuff...in the middle of Asuka's bedroom," Misato sighs, and pinches the bridge of her nose, pacing Shinji's bedroom as he sits on the bed, "You're sixteen. You're past the age of consent in Japan. But if you didn't use protection, I'm going to *geld* you, no matter how many creatures in NERV's basement want grandkids."

He holds up his hands defensively.

"I used protection."

"Not just a condom-"

"And spermicide. And a birth control pill Mom designed for men. And I made sure Asuka was using protection."

Misato blinks, staring at him.

"How long were you planning this? Why did you have all that on hand?"

"Misato, my mom is a biologist. When she gave me the *Talk* it involved a video of everything that could go wrong. I couldn't sleep for two days."

Misato sighs, sitting next to him on the bed.

"So...how many people..."

"We were in your Dad's office," Misato says, arm around his shoulder,

"Me, your Mom, Dr. Sohryu. Ritz, Maya, pretty sure Rei was watching. So were the other girls. Kei was demanding videos."

He blanches, groaning.

"We're going to hold a 'Shinji and Asuka finally f_ing did it' party when we get back to NERV. Then I'm turning you both over to your Mom so she can take a chunk out of you. But first, we have to get you two packed up so we can head off to New Vegas."

...

"I think now's as good a time as any for some...girl time."

Kyoko brought the arm of Asuka's plugsuit, the orange arm and sphere of Asuka's omnitool playing over the sphere of crap as Asuka nods, one ear open to Kyoko as Kyoko scans the thing with her PDA.

"I am aware I pressured you when we came over," Kyoko says, "Did that have an influence on what happened?"

Asuka purses her lips.

"Not r-really," she says, "I d-don't think so. If it happened w-when we came to Tokyo, t would, but it's b-been three months since you brought it up."

Kyoko nods, tapping open a screen as readings come up.

"Good," she says, "I've admittedly done a lot of horrible things to you. I'd rather you not jump into anything like this unless you were ready. Is Katsuragi going to have trouble keeping you two apart?"

"We talked about this, Mother. Shinji and I did. We...this is a n-new thing for us, b-but we won't..."

"Behave like your father and I?"

Asuka nods, mutely.

"Good," Kyoko says, a faint smile on her lips, "Because as much as your father and I have an on the surface resemblance to your relationship, I'd rather you didn't emulate us."

Sighing, Kyoko pulls out her phone and taps in the number, waiting.

"Yui, it's me," she says, "I'm confirming readings. We're getting no Blue Pattern from the chunk that landed in Katsuragi's apartment. I've fed the data into the MAGI but it's also telling me that the Angel's Blue Pattern has dispersed. It looks like we have a false alarm."

She nods, listening to the voice on the other side as Asuka sits cross legged in front of the angel chunk.

"Yes, we are lecturing the children. You'll do that during the trip. Bye."

She closes the phone, putting it away.

"We'll have this cleaned up by the time we get back from New Vegas," she says, and sighs, "Asuka, I have no moral high ground. I have screwed up enough with you that I have no right to question your life choices. Do you love him?"

"I do."

Kyoko reaches out, cupping her chin.

"Then I am happy for you," she says, and smirks, "Don't tell Katsuragi I said that. She isn't very happy right now."

"*I HEARD THAT!"*

"Then get some thicker walls!" Kyoko yells back, "I want *grandkids!"*

...

The plane used to transport the Evangelions is, put simply, massive. It is a flying wing nearly four hundred feet in diameter, hollow and unmanned save for small compartments that serve as the cockpit, emergency maintenance, defense platforms, and cargo delivery. Lying horizontally, stacked one on top of the other, Unit 01, Unit 02, and Jet Alone Prime are positioned and locked into place on the wing, subsequently locked in an armor compartment for each one to mask what they are.

"You're sure you can't come."

Yui sighs the sigh forming in her husband's throat as the Supreme Commander of NERV doesn't meet her gaze, standing in the

underground hangar with her.

"We both know Sohryu and Fuyutsuki can handle diplomacy better than me. So, they should be there, while I supervise the cleanup. Kei has found a sample of the Angel so your father can help analyze it."

"Stop changing the subject, Gendo. We were planning this."

He turns her around, his hands on her waist. His glasses slide down his nose as he meets her eyes, and he nods.

"And I'm disappointed, to," he says, "But it's only a few days. We'll plan something when you get back."

"We may not have time. The scenario-"

"Is changing. We'll make the time. And I can lecture Shinji when you get back after his three days of being yelled at by you. So we'll call it even."

She sighs, patting his cheek.

"I'll leave some for you," she says, and pecks him on the lips, "Keep me up to date on the repairs. Also, I'll forward my father's findings to Akagi. We need to figure out why the Angel died right when it attacked. This can't be coincidence."

He nods, diengaging from her as she walks towards the loading operation. And hands in his pockets, Gendo turns and walks into the lift back to his office.

...

"Okay, if an Angel just appeared over Tokyo-3, and a chunk of it landed in the apartment, why are we a) getting worked up about...us...and b) why are we going to Vegas?"

Yui's original plan of having Shinji sit in her office and get lectured by her went to seed shortly after she arrived. She does have a habit of underestimating her son's intelligence simply because he doesn't apply it to science like she does. Usually she's comforted by the fact.

"Something's not adding up," he continues, "If there's an Angel attack, why are all the Evas leaving the city?"

"I think you should tell him, Yui," Kyoko says, appearing in the now open doorway, "I already told Asuka."

Yui sputters. Kyoko smirks, gesturing to the chair which Shinji sits in.

"We're going to Vegas to supervise the test activation of Evangelion Unit 03," Yui says with a sigh, as Kyoko closes the door, "NERV-America is built underneath the Vegas Arcology, which is not a very well known secret. The cover story is that we are on a family vacation. Your father and I would be on our second honeymoon, while you, Asuka, and Rei are guests of honor at a convention being held in Vegas."

"Mom, an Angel attacked the city."

"An Angel which has gone completely inert," Kyoko corrects, "Junior says that the Angel isn't...there...for lack of a better term, and also identified which one it is. Ikari, do you remember when we visited the other universes?"

Shinji nods.

"Good. I encountered a version of Asuka who had lived through all the Angels," Kyoko continues, pausing, "In her timeline, Unit 03 was possessed by an Angel. It rampaged, and was eventually killed. Its pilot was crippled."

"Who was the pilot?"

"Not important," Kyoko waves off, "What's important is that the Fourth Child is Uri. So, I had several favors called in so that the Unit 03 activation would be held in America, so no overseas flight was necessary for the Eva. Which is also why we're bringing the Evangelions, just in case there *is* an Angel in Unit 03."

"As for the Angel that just attacked, it's gone complete inert," Yui continues, "Junior's confirmed that he can't sense anything from the Angel. Besides which, we can't put off the trip any longer. We'll be going there to get Unit 05 refitted with a new N2 engine and we need him back to full capacity."

He nods, staring at his mother.

"Of course, we need to have some talks on the way," Yui says.

"Of course," Shinji responds, "Because with the twenty four hour

surveillance you have in the apartment, there's no way you could have stopped us instead of watching us like a group of voyeurs."

Yui sputters. Kyoko chuckles, patting him on the shoulder.

"Ikari, you will have plenty of time to lecture the two during the flight. Ikari, go meet the others. We have guests on the plane you need to help keep entertained. Go."

Shinji nods, and walks out, shutting the door behind him.

"He didn't need to know," Yui says, glaring.

"On the contrary, from what I could tell from the Asuka I learned about 03 from, the very reason that things went so badly is that they were always kept in the dark by everyone. We serve no one by keeping the most important tools so blind to their purpose, Ikari. Putting all the power in one person's hand makes them only more likely to go mad with that power."

And before Yui can give a retort, Kyoko turns on her heel and walks out.

...

The passenger plane set aside for the trip was bought by NERV and retrofitted along the lines of the Air Force One model of planes kept by the United States government, only smaller. Instead of serving as a mobile government, the NERV passenger plane serves as a mobile office and living quarters for long trips, especially long trips involving the Pilots or support staff.

NERV does, after all, acknowledge how important the Pilots are. Their safety and comfort are of great concern.

Of course, that the plane mounts a cannon normally used on naval battlecruisers is also a well-kept secret, but in addition to protecting the Children from harm, NERV also protects them from things they just don't need to know. That is the mantra Yui lives by. There are some things the children- both her children and the Children- just do not need to know. She salves her worries with knowing they are happier in their admittedly temporary ignorance, even if they do have the infuriating but refreshing habit of finding out things they shouldn't.

Still, not to worry about, for now. Kyoko let them know before she scheduled for them to find out, both about Unit 03 and about Lilith. She wishes she could have controlled their encounter with Lilith. That way they wouldn't have had the...thing...last night, as she tells herself.

Staring out the window on the NERV-1 passenger plane, in her seat in one of the three main cabins, she watches the Pacific inch by. The communications suite set up lets her receive regular updates, and once more she swears to herself. This wasn't just going to be an inspection, but also their second honeymoon. The Scenario is winding down. Despite Gendo's optimism, she isn't sure if this opportunity will come again.

"Hey. I just got Rei out of the ducts. Kei's napping and why didn't you tell me Hikari and Touji were coming with us?"

"Well, this was supposed to be a family trip," Yui says, slowly shifting her gaze over to Shinji, "Of course, things change. But I thought you'd want to spend time with your friends."

Shinji bites his lip, looking from side to side.

"I'm being punished, aren't I?" he asks.

She nods.

"At least you're honest," he sighs, leaning on the seat as she folds her arms, "Look, I'm sorry. I honestly wasn't planning on this. I'm trying to be responsible, but I honestly don't know what I can say to you."

Yui sighs, staring at him. Shaking her head she leans back in her seat.

"Shinji, sooner or later I *will* accept that you're no longer my baby," she says, "And I honestly hoped, in some old fashioned way, that you and Asuka would wait until you were married. I'm happy you used some sort of protection...well, a *lot* of protection from what Misato told me...but I'm not going to be dancing in the hallway that you and Asuka had *sex* when you're sixteen years old. Yes, you have a dangerous job and that makes some allowances, but I am your *mother."*

A crash in the other cabin.

"And now Hikari knows," Yui says, "May God show mercy on you."

A stomping. Shinji pales as Hikari exits the cabin, entering the cabin

he is standing in and staring at him. Without a word, she grabs him by the ear and pulls him into the cabin she and the others are in, Shinji screaming the entire way.

As the door slams, Yui turns back to the view, smiling. It's always good to have a little leg breaker, she thinks.

...

In the past few days, Hikari has adopted as her pet a small animal she's named Kuba. Kuba is about a foot tall, green and black with white at the shoulders, fingers and toes and three eyed face. It doesn't take long for Shinji to recognize that it is an Israfim, sitting on Hikari's lap, staring at him in the same accusing tone she is.

She hasn't said anything. He isn't sure why. Well, there was that whole aborted flirting thing he and Hikari kept doing when he came over, but that can't be the reason. Most likely, Shinji thinks, she's just inarticulate with rage. Mom has known the Horaki family for a while. He wouldn't be surprised if Hikari was prone to Flurgen Fits.

"So," Touji says, leaning on the table in front of Shinji and Asuka, arms folded as he stares at them, "The cameras your Mom's watchin' is the main thing keepin' me from givin' you a high five."

Hikari turns, snapping a glare off at him as he sheepishly grins and winces, Kuba pointing an accusing finger at him.

Forcing her pet's arm down, Hikari takes several deep breaths, closing her eyes as Shinji unconsciously curls his hand around Asuka's own, both of them sharing a smile.

"I like to think," Shinji says, "That my Mom's anger about this is sort of tempered with the entire command staff watching us over the security cameras."

"Yeah, that strikes me as kinda, you know...stupid," Touji responds, coughing, "Hey, if you two are happy, so am I."

"Considering we're not moral authorities on this, either," Hikari sighs, "I'd rant about you two living in sin, but you've been dating for months and you live together."

Asuka nods.

"I th-think Misato's upset that it was sudden," she adds.

"Hell, I think Misato wanted to set it up in the first place," Shinji sighs, rubbing his temples, "Or at least be somewhat responsible for it."

All four of them sigh, as does the Israfim. The door to the cabin opens, and muttering to herself about there not being any beer on the plane, Mana enters.

"If it helps," Asuka says, "W-we already t-talked about this. We're n-not moving out of Misato's apartment and w-we're not getting married right n-now. And w-we're not going to risk getting pregnant."

"I could make her pregnant," Mana observes.

All four teenagers turn to Mana.

"How?" Asuka asks.

Mana shrugs.

"Cybernetics. I'm full of useful devices."

...

Hours later. The plane landed without incident. The luggage has been sent to the hotel while their rooms were being prepared. Yui hasn't said much, neither has Sub Director Sohryu, while Kyoko was promptly shuttled off towards the NERV facility deep underneath New Vegas, where she will be spending the three days they will be there.

And now, Kei and Rei are standing in front of a waffle house, where a sign prominently advertises an 'All You Can Eat Buffet.'

"How long has it been since you've eaten your own weight in food?" Kei asks.

"Wee~ell, I couple of weeks," Rei says, leaning back and forth on her heels, "I mean, since I hadta regrow my arm."

"They seem to be challenging us."

Rei and Kei both smile in the way that makes them impossible to tell apart. Behind them, Shinji pulls on Misato's jacket sleeve.

"Isn't that a form of economic warfare?" he asks.

Misato nods.

"Okay, girls!" Misato shouts, the two Ayanamis turning to them, "No messing with the local economy! We're heading to the hotel!"

She turns to the assembled teenagers, folding her arms.

"Okay," she says, "Shinji, Touji. You've got a room. Hikari, Asuka, you've got a room. Rei, Kei, you've got a room. No switching rooms. Got it?"

Six agreements.

"Great. My display this morning besides, I actually do trust you all not to do any hanky panky when I'm not looking," Misato says, flashing her winning smile, "Of course, if neither mine nor Kaji's phones are answering when you call tonight, that means that I'm actually a giant hypocrite. So have fun, be safe, and if you're not safe, name it after me. Besides which, we need you three,"

She gestures at Shinji, Asuka, and Rei.

"Up bright and early tomorrow for the Convention PR shit. And me too, since my identity got leaked. So, let's head to the hotel, meet up with the brass, and see if we can find out if Dr. Sohryu's found Uri, yet."

...

"You are *shitting* me."

Pieter's words almost echo as he stares at the other occupant of the suite. Still holding her suitcase, bags under her eyes as she stares across the suite, Yui pinches the bridge of her nose as Pieter double checks the key card and enters.

"Right," Yui sighs, "Originally, the plan was for you to run NERV and Gendo to be here. They must have forgotten to change the rooms."

"Any chance we can get a change?"

"The hotel, every hotel, is fully booked," she sighs, dumping her suitcase onto the heart shaped bed, "And now we're sharing the

honeymoon suite."

Dropping his suitcase at the entrance to the door, he thrusts his hands in his pockets and takes a look around. Everything is red and pink. The floors are red, velvet carpet, the bed red and pink and on a raised platform, with a projection television over it. Unlike most suites, the room is one room with an alcove for the kitchen and closet and bathroom.

Sighing, he walks over to the couch next to the kitchen and pulls off the pillows, grabbing the handle and pulling out the couch bed.

"Well, it also looks like an after the honeymoon's over suite, to," he says with a grin, "You take the bed, I'll take the couch."

She smiles, nodding.

"Good idea," she says, opening her suitcase and staring at it, "*Flurgen."*

"What?"

"I never re-packed," she groans, slapping her hand over her face, sitting on the bed and holding her head in her hands, "Perfect. I'm sharing a room with my immediate subordinates, I have a suitcase full of *lingerie,* and my son is probably getting *hitched!*"

"Yui, I seriously doubt that Shinji and Asuka are sneaking off to a chapel."

"They already had sex!"

"And you *watched!"*

Pieter stops himself, clenching and unclenching his hands before sitting down on the couch bed.

"Yui, I respect that you're upset about this," he says, "If I wasn't such a shitty father, I'd be upset, myself. But the fact is, you have them under twenty four hour surveillance. If you didn't want that to happen, there were a *lot* of things you could have done, least of which being calling them on the cell phones *they always have on them* and telling them to stop and think about what they're doing. The right thing to do, if you don't like what happened, was not to *watch them on your security cameras.*"

Yui stares at him. Slapping his knees, he makes as if he is going to

stand up but does not move, staring at her.

"Yui, the reason I didn't lecture Shinji or Asuka is because I'm a *shitty father,*" he continues, "I didn't even know about Asuka until she was *four*. I haven't said no to Mari once in her entire life. I've spoiled one daughter and I wasn't even there for most of the life of the other. Any attempt I make to lecture Asuka about her life choices would be completely invalidated by her asking, 'Well, great, but where were you for the first sixteen years of my life?'"

He sighs, dramatically. He seems to deflate as he finishes, hanging his head as she stares at him.

"Yeah, well, that's my input," he says, "Take it as you will. I'm just saying...I'm happy for them. Do I wish they made a better choice or waited? Well, if I wanted my opinion to matter one damned bit with her, I would've made it a point to connect with her, not sleep with her mother. I'll remind you Asuka's mainly in the situation she's been her entire life because I can't keep it in my pants."

He stands up, rummaging through his bag and taking out his phone.

"But at least I don't hold it against anyone but myself," he says, "I'm going to check in with Kyoko and then grab some dinner. Don't wait up."

He slams the door as he exits.

...

"So, the arrangement will be that I will be you, and you will be named Samantha Dolores Anderson, who has come from Ohio to cosplay," Kei states, as she and Rei ride down the elevator into the depths of the New Vegas construct, "My wager is that it will take fifteen minutes until we can make Section 2 question random cosplayers."

"Deal," Rei says, holding a container identical to Kei's. Each container is gray, nondescript and half the size of the girls, with a red fig leaf emblazoned on the side.

"Kei, what're these for, anyway?"

"We have been requested to deliver these," Kei responds, "He and I have kept in contact during my time in Berlin."

The lift stops. It opens into a large well lit metal corridor, fig leaves emblazoned on the sides of the walls as Kei leads Rei down, both holding the containers will little shown effort. Technicians, unfamiliar faces, pass them by as they see them busy along, bustling activity filling the base. They pass by a full wall window, seeing the black cheekbone and yellow eye of Evangelion Unit 03 as metal plates are welded in place near the jaw.

"Wow," Rei says with a grin, "Sooo~ooo that's the new guy?"

"Correct," Kei responds, "I have been chosen as the Sixth Child. When Unit 04a is complete, I will pilot it."

Rei grins wider, and they continue on, exiting the corridor and entering a pair of double doors leading to a laboratory. The sole occupant, an older man in white hair and expressive, black eyebrows looks up from the display screen built into the desk and stares at the girls. He does not smile. He does not have a tendency to smile.

"Ah, good. Kei."

"Grandfather," Kei says, bowing, as Rei waves.

Katsuhito Ikari gestures to the table in front of him, as the two Ayanamis place their containers, opening them to reveal several air tight, sealed bags of blue green Angelic material.

"Junior referred to the Angel as Bardiel," Kei says, "And confirms it is inert."

"Excellent," Katsuhito says, opening one of the smaller bags, placing the material on a scale which quickly reads out a number and dips into the table, holograms folding out to display structure, "Well done, girls. This will prove most useful for my research."

"What'cha researching for?" Rei sing songs.

"Enhancements for your Evangelions, Rei. This is already giving me ideas..."

Folding his arms, he begins muttering to himself, circling the desk. And nodding, Kei leads Rei out, letting their grandfather continue his work.

"He will be in charge of refitting 05 with the N2 engine," Kei says, "Go-kun will be back to full functionality, soon."

"I know," Rei squeals, "An that'llbeawesome! We're gonna kick ass and kill Angels and stomp thinks and use the new plasma gun in her arm-"

"Her?"

"Found out Go-kun's sort of not a guy and also not really wanting to get freaky with me," Rei says, "An wants to get all licky with Jet Alone, to, so I'm setting them up! They'll make awesome ***babies.***"

Kei blinks.

"Jet Alone is a 250' tall robot. Go-kun is an Evangelion. If what you're saying is true, it is biologically possible for them to produce offspring."

"I know," Rei says with an ear to ear grin, "We'll need to use ***science.***"

Kei blinks again. At times she does indeed have trouble understanding the mindset of her sisters.

"Ayanami?"

Both turn. Tall, pretty, ash hair and red eyes, Kaworu Nagisa had turned the corner and freezes, glancing between the two.

"Kei?" he asks.

"Nagisa," Kei says, "What are you doing here?"

"I came here to act as encouragement to Uriel," Kaworu says, glancing between the identical sisters, "You look...well. How have you been?"

"Well," Kei says, quickly, "I have been well. We were just visiting Professor Ikari."

"And stuff," Rei adds, leaning back and forth on the heels of her sneakers, "Soooo~ooo we gotta go! And stuff!"

Grabbing Kei by the collar, she runs off, as Kaworu turns the corner and watches them go. Shaking his head, he continues walking, walking past the still Unit 03. He stares at it for a moment, and shakes his head to calm himself, walking to return to his temporary quarters.

...

Staring at his cell phone, Pieter rubs the bridge of his nose, shifting his

gaze between that and his salad in the hotel restaurant. He made a quick phone call, Kyoko confirming that Uri was there, that she was busy, and would be busy until they finally switched Unit 03 on in two days. Final preparations for an initial activation were a time constraining thing, and she knew that better than anyone. This was, after all, the second that she's supervised. If anything, she seemed happy to be in her element and in control.

"If it helps, I just had a long talk with Shinji about my behaviors. He promised not to get eloped as long as I stop answering every question about my spying on him with 'But I'm your mother.'"

Pieter looks up from his salad. Yui sits across the table from him, changed from her blouse and slacks to a set of sweats, putting her purse on the table.

"It's a good start," he says, "I had a talk with Asuka about how I don't like what they did, but as long as they hold off on marrying until after high school I'll be happy. If they hold off until after college, I'll be happier."

He sips his beer, shrugging.

"I think we've overblown things," he says, "Yes, we're not happy about what they did. But Yui, they're in the most dangerous job in the world. We can't hold them to the same standards we hold everyone else. We cost them their childhoods, so the least we can do is try to understand them making some grasp at happiness."

She nods, smiling.

"You're a better father than you give yourself credit for," she says, smiling as he chuckles, "At least you try to understand them. I just went off on a tear after them. Hell, I shipped him off to his aunt and uncle for ten years because I was too busy to raise him."

He reaches out, patting her hand.

"You went nuts because you're his mother," he says, "You've been the mother to every pilot we have, your girls, and my daughter even before Katsuragi got involved and Kyoko got her head on straight. Don't sell yourself short, Yui."

She nods with a sigh, smiling.

"Mind some company for dinner?" she asks, "I figure we can run into

Katsuragi and Kaji afterwards."

"Sounds good," he says, snapping his fingers as a waiter comes over, "My treat."

"That's not necessary."

"I insist," he says with a smile, "I did rake you over the coals, after all. Think of it as me making it up to you."

She nods and takes the menu. And a pair of red eyes watch from the ducts above.

...

Asuka is talking with Misato in her room, and Touji is off finding the hotel gym, leaving her alone with her pet...thingy...which isn't that bad according to Hikari.

The duct opens, and Hikari looks up just as Rei lands in a crouch in front of her. Kuba, as he is wont to around Rei, has hidden behind her, as if Hikari can offer protection from Rei. But she can't.

Nothing could save him from the Rei if she were so inclined.

"Heee~ey," Rei sing songs, "I got an idea."

"Okay," Hikari says, pulling Kuba into her lap, "What sort of idea?"

"*Romance."*

Hikari blinks.

"For who?"

Rei only grins wider.

"Weee~ell, I see how Kei and Kaworu look at each other and I think it'd just be great if we get them together and get their romantic juices flowing and maybe put together a y'know life and death situation which causes them to admit their true feelings right right right?"

She didn't even breathe during the entire thing, Hikari realizes.

"Okay," she says, "How?"

"Weee~ell," Rei says, "I'm gonna need your help. And some accomplices. And flowers."

Rei's eyes almost glow, Hikari realizes.

"Because this is gonna be *awesome."*

Chapter 63: Convention Time

The New Vegas Convention Center is a sprawling structure the size of a sports stadium, compartmentalized on several levels and several floors to make the most of its space. The dome covers it from the weather as it is on the top level of the New Vegas vertical sprawl, allowing real sunlight to filter through the transparent, reinforced ceiling which protects the inside environments from the post Second Impact coastal weather.

Currently, the main floor of the convention center is taken up by people in cardboard imitations of Evangelion armor, latex fetish plugsuits and bad blue hair dye.

Dressed in their NERV dress uniforms, consisting of the NERV blazer, a white buttoned shirt and black slacks or knee-length skirt depending on gender, Shinji, Asuka, and Rei stare out at the throbbing mass of humanity that is Evacon '17.

"It's beautiful," Rei says, tears in her eyes.

Behind her, Yui and Pieter exchange a glance and shrug, before Misato brings up the air horn.

"Okay, cell phones on at all times," Misato shouts, "If you get in trouble, the pass word is 'Funky.' That's what alerts your Section 2 escort that someone gets the hose. Check in every half hour. Shinji, Asuka, get to your panel. Rei, you walk the floor. Break!"

They shuffle off, leaving Yui and Pieter to watch them go.

"Okay," he says, "This is the craziest thing I think I've seen in my time at NERV."

"Wait," Yui says, "It gets better. I think I saw Kei in the ducts."

He sighs, extending a closed fist. She meets his with her own, and the two part to conduct their own forms of damage control. Or at least, attempt to, as not as soon do they loose visual sight of each other that a pale hand extends from the duct work and drags Yui in.

Chapter 63: Convention Time

The New Vegas duct system is surprisingly roomy. For all her scientific knowledge, Yui still hasn't figured out exactly how the Ree navigate ductwork like they do, so when she opens her eyes she finds herself in a duct work alcove, which for some reason has comfy bean bag chairs set up and a table.

"Kei?" she asks.

Sitting across the table from her, a pot of tea on the table between them, Kei has her hands folded in her lap and is staring at her mother.

"I wanted to talk to you," Kei says, in her typical, subdued manner, "About you and the Sub Director."

Yui sighs. She had to figure one of the girls had been tracking them last night. If anything, she should have figured out it would be Kei. Of all of them, Yui has always felt that she was the one closest to her, and also the one most curious about her.

"What do you need to talk about?" she asks, still looking around the room, wondering why a sitting room was set up in the duct work.

"Are you attracted to Sub Director Sohryu?"

Yui's gaze snaps back.

"What?"

"I watched," Kei responds, "You had dinner with him. You were drinking with him. You and he were both inebriated and you spent time at the hotel's dance club together. The shifting of your hips around him suggested a physical attraction to him. You speak to him differently than you do to Father."

Yui sighs. Inwardly, she begins going over the events of last night. Yes, they did have a good time. Yes, if it wasn't for the fact that it would be impossible to refer to such things as a date, it would have been a date. And yes, the entire situation itself is suggestive, what with her suitcase more tailored for a amorous weekend with her husband than sharing the suite with Pieter.

And yes, her night clothes are rather on the lacy side, but that's all a matter of mistaken packing than anything else.

Am I attracted to Pieter?

"I'm not attracted to Pieter," she says, quickly taking control of the conversation, "Kei, did we do anything else?"

Kei blinks.

"Kei, did he and I do anything inappropriate?" she asks, "Did we kiss?"

"No."

"Did we have sex?"

Kei blushes.

"No," she says, snapping it out harder than she intended, "No, you did not."

"That's right," Yui says, inwardly cursing how little social interaction her daughters have had, "Pieter is a friend and a coworker. My relationship with him is different than with your father. He is a very nice man and a good friend and we had a long discussion about the mistakes I made with Shinji and Asuka, and he treated me to dinner and we had a fun time. Do you understand?"

Kei taps her fingers together.

"No."

Yui sighs, smiling, reaching out and taking one of Kei's hands.

"Let's look at it this way," she says, "When you spend time with your brother, do you enjoy yourself?"

Kei nods.

"How about with Mr. Nagisa?"

Kei's cheeks flush. She blinks, averting Yui's gaze.

"When I spent time with Pieter, it's like when you are around Shinji," Yui continues, "We have fun, we laugh, we enjoy ourselves. When I spent time with your father, it's like you and Kaworu."

"He's not my boyfriend," Kei quickly responds, "May I change the subject?"

God yes, Yui thinks, but says, "Of course."

Kei blinks, taking her hand back, wringing them as she tries to avert Yui's gaze, looking down at the tea cup and finding it oh so interesting.

"Am I your favorite?"

Yui blinks, staring at Kei. She has long suspected that Kei's habit of hanging onto her was due to her having a connection, or desiring a deeper connection to her. The way Kei wrings her hands upon asking the question, though, makes her wonder how deep that need was. She never thought that she would be so blunt, though, but as she sees Kei shift in her seat upon asking it, Yui comes to the quick conclusion that it is not just a phase with her.

"Kei," she says, "Why are you asking this?"

"I want to know," Kei says, "I have been curious. Jealous."

"Of Rei?"

"Yes."

"Because she spent more time out than you?"

Kei nods. Of course, Yui thinks, it was only because Rei was finished first compared with the other Ree. Naoko never had time to stabilize their cores.

"Kei," Yui says, taking Kei's hand, and pauses. For a moment, she considers the old standby line. That no, none of them are her favorites because she loves them all equally. But then there was that conversation with Kyoko before they left, those days ago, about how unintentionally Yui could do the same thing to Kei that Kyoko did to Asuka for all those years.

And maybe she has. Maybe she has damaged her daughter like Kyoko did her own, unintentionally. Maybe she should have recognized it when Kei would latch onto her during those VR trips or when she adopted her own gibberish curses or was so *happy* when Yui asked her to join her in Project E.

Maybe she can keep it from going pear shaped if she just tells a white lie. Not a falsehood, but not a whole truth.

"Of course you're my favorite."

...

Most of the panel he and Asuka were at consisted of people in second hand plugsuits, imitation NERV uniforms, and reporters for *school newspapers* asking them about their relationship. The director of the anime NERV commissioned, who looked a lot like the Narrator program in Ichi's birthday party, kept deflecting questions by both telling them to 'fanwank something,' whatever that meant and showing clips from the movie.

Or, more in particular, the new movie. He already had a rough cut of the movie done, which for some reason ended with everyone dying and a scene near the beginning in an infirmary which ended up causing Sub Director Sohryu to give him a black eye. Something about meat pulling, whatever that means.

Anyway, they soon discovered that the Ree switched his meds behind his back, corrected the problem, and now he's making a four movie series now that Mom gave the girls a stern talking to. Of course, for some reason all he can think that in the movies *Dad is really an asshole and Rei's acting like Kei and Asuka has better curves than that.*

"Okay, next panel!"

The section 2 escorts, undercover as convention workers who nonetheless are heavily armed, escort Asuka and him down the convention center halls and into the next panel room, sitting them next to each other at a table where they can look out at the crowd and their hearts stop. Looking behind him, Shinji stares at the illuminated screen.

"Cosplay and Fanfiction Panel," it reads.

Turning back to stare at the veritable sea of Rei, all of them holding scripts, Asuka taps her fingers on the table as Misato takes a seat next to her.

"So," Misato whispers, "Here I was, thinking, 'What do you see right before you die?' And what do you know..."

...

Kei was walking with more of a smile than she usually does, even if

she was imitating Rei and randomly tackle hugging the voice actors. She and Rei kept trying to lock Mr. Spencer and Mrs. Grant in a room together for some reason, claiming that they were 'shipping' or something along those lines. Of course, the conversation she had with Little Mommy was more than a little responsible for her good mood. Walking through the convention center in her plug suit, or more in particular Rei's plugsuit, she is enjoying herself.

Then her plug suit chimes and the visual transmitter in her A-10 connector comes to life, displaying a message that Grandfather needs to talk to her.

"Rei," she says, "Take over."

She passes a ventilation cover, which swings open and Rei drops down in an identical plugsuit, high fiving with her sister and shifting back into the crowd as Kei lets the camera at the double doors take a picture. The doors open, revealing a long metal corridor with the emblazoned fig leaf, Kei walking down it and towards the lift elevator that will express her down to the Project E labs.

The doors open. In the cab, Kaworu stares back, stepping aside as she enters and the doors close.

"Hello, Kei," he says with a smile. She smirks back.

"I am wearing Rei's plugsuit."

"It is easy to tell the two of you apart if you know what to look for," he responds, "You and Rei are...playing...with the convention organizers?"

"Of course. We have to pass the time somehow."

He smiles in response, the doors clicking down. Elsewhere, watching from the camera she was given the codes for set in the elevator, Rei grins and presses the large red button on the remote. A small amount of C4 detonates, triggering releases and safeties which cause the elevator to drop suddenly before coming to a complete halt.

Kei squeaks in surprise, tripping and falling against Kaworu, both of them sprawled out on the elevator floor.

Grinning, Rei closes the camera feed and turns, walking into co-conspirator number one.

"Trap's sprung?" Hikari asks.

"Yeee~ep. Camera codes work by the way, Grandpa."

Katsuhito's image appears in Rei's vision.

"*Of course. Keep me updated. Inform me if she injures him."*

"Will do!"

Clicking the image shut, she skips back into the convention, Hikari following.

...

Three shivering wrecks sit around a table in the cafeteria, eyes wide, lips quivering, trying to place the horror that they have just witnessed. Lowering the canned coffee to the table, Shinji turns to Asuka.

"How many?"

"I s-saw six," she says.

"I saw four," he responds.

"You lucky bastard," Misato groans, "I saw twelve. Two of them hit on me."

Shinji shudders.

"Why do so many guys like to dress up as Rei?" he asks.

"Because their sick, sick, depraved bastards," Misato moans, "And what was with the fanfiction?"

"Well, there was the one writer who really thought Unit 01 was cute," Asuka says, and shudders, "And...tentacles? Did any story need those many tentacles? Not that he was a bad writer, he was actually fantastic-"

"But creepy," Misato adds, "And the guy in the cloak who kept insisting on being Rei's driving instructor. And those were the tame ones."

"Why was I having sex with Rei in *every single one of them?*" Shinji

asks, "It was either me and Rei, me and Asuka, me and *Mom*-"

"Which is all sorts of wrong," Misato asks, "Especially that one the one guy wrote where you had a three way with your Mom and *me*."

"And I never met Mr. Nagisa!" Asuka yells, pounding her fist on the table, "Why would I want to have sex with him?"

She pauses, gaze darting to the rest of the cafeteria, shrinking slightly when she realizes how loud that was.

"Okay," Misato sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose, "I need a beer. But first, we have more panels. Asuka, you're meeting Dr. Ikari at the 'Explaining How a Giant Robot Works' Panel. Shinji, you're at the 'Cooking with Ikari' Panel. I'm at the 'Planning to Kill a Giant Monster' panel. Meet up after we're done."

Two groans of acceptance. Shinji watches them go, checking his watch and rifling through his jacket for his convention pass. Which he notices isn't there. Sighing, figuring they'll let him in anyway, he gets up, padding down the hallway to the room labeled for his panel, walking to the door and finding the two convention workers there.

"Panel starts in twenty minutes," one says, scratching his nose.

"I know," Shinji says, "I'm one of the panelists."

The two convention workers stare at him. Then, they break out laughing.

"Yeah, okay," Shinji sighs, waving them off, and begins walking down the hallway to where he remembers Asuka is presenting, figuring he might as well add some humor to today by watching Mom rip into a couple of people.

Or at least, would, if a closet door entrance didn't open and a gaggle of female hands grab him, dragging him into the closet and locking the doors behind him. The light clicks on, and Shinji stares at the half dozen girls in varied makeshift plugsuits and NERV uniforms smiling at him.

"Um...hi?"

...

The emergency lighting has switched on, and the elevator music playing for some reason resembles smooth jazz, but they figure it is an american thing. Kaworu already tried the phones, finding no luck, while Kei kept trying to contact Rei through the plugsuit. No luck. And she knows why, of course. They are, by their nature, not subtle.

"It's good to see you again," Kaworu says, glancing at her.

"Mm."

"You're upset," he observes, and sighs, resting his head against the cabin wall, "I figured as much. What did I do?"

She turns to him.

"What?"

"I figured I did something to upset you, already," he responds, eyes closed, hands folded in his lap, "I was going to ask you if you thought Rei was interested in another date, but I figured that...right. I shouldn't have even said that."

Kei shifts away from him, sitting in the corner of the elevator and glaring at him.

"You are lusting after my identical twin sister," Kei says, "I have come to the conclusion you are not malicious, just an *idiot*."

They glare at each other. He sits up, eyes glowing faintly in the barely lit elevator cab as she scowls. Finally, with a grunt, he stands up, staring down at her as he places his hands on his hips.

"And why is that?" he demands, voice level, "Explain to me."

"You desire my sister," Kei mutters, enunciating each word, "I should not have to explain this."

"Rei has been out of the MAGI longer than you," he responds, "She's more suitable for breeding. Rei and I would create a genetically viable Tabrim offspring that could start a viable genetic line. If I tried to do so with a Lilim the Tabric traits would be lost within three generations."

She stands up. Without thinking it, without deciding it, she has grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, pulling him down to her level.

"My sister is the *only* genetic partner for this?" she asks, "She is the

only one you would think of as your partner?"

For a moment, he could swear, in the dim light of the cabin, that her eyes were wet.

"You mean...you?" he asks, blinking, "Why would I ever think of you as a mating partner?"

She stops, stepping back, recoiling as if she was slapped. The tears stream down her cheeks and she looks away, releasing his shirt.

"I would never think of you as a brood mare," he says, "You're much more important to me than that."

"Really?" she chokes, turning back to him.

"Absolutely. I see you as my intellectual equal. I think of you with much more respect than that. I only figure Rei has been out of the MAGI long enough that physically she would be more capable of breeding. Besides which, I've seen the videos. I wouldn't want to put you through that sort of pain."

"Brood mare."

Kaworu chuckles slightly, scratching the back of his neck.

"I...don't mean it like that," he says, "I invested in a thesaurus. I am trying to find more appropriate words for these sorts of things. For example, I shouldn't use 'brood mare' or 'breeding stock' or 'f_buddy' or-"

Kei smiles. She is silent, save for her breathing and the pulsing of the vein in her neck, as her eyes seem to glow in the dim light.

"Nagisa."

"Yes, Kei?" he asks, glancing from side to side, wondering what is taking the repair crews so long.

"You are aware I am from Lilith, correct?"

"Yes, I am, but what does that have to-"

With that, she grabs him by the collar, pulling him down and mashing her lips against his. For a moment, he struggles, eyes going wide as his hands clench and unclench. Until finally, mercifully, he reaches out, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her close as their eyes close

and the only sounds in the cab are the music, their own breathing, and the satisfied moan as their lips release.

"I think we need some air," she whispers, her arms wrapped around his shoulders, his own around her waist.

"I can not disagree," he responds, "Suggestions?"

Her eyes glow. The vent on top of the elevator shaft pops off, and grabbing him by the belt, she ascends.

...

Somewhere between finding that there was a large, blown up picture of him on the wall in the room and that they told him that a blue haired girl told them how to find him, he came to the unsettling conclusion that this was all set up by *Rei.* Which also disturbs him. Rei likes him and Asuka together. Surely she wouldn't want him to be ravished by a half dozen female fans, would she?

"Okay," one of them says, with a blue wig, clad in a plugsuit and in her twenties, "Let's get introductions out of the way! I'm Amber."

"Jenny," the blonde in the NERV uniform says, elbowing the short brown haired girl next to her, "And she's Claire."

"And I'm Dana," the apparent leader, the one with the black braid and the plugsuit says, absently jerking her thumb to the last two keeping out of Shinji's line of sight, "And that's Gema and Bri."

Shinji blinks. Looks for exits. Finds none.

"Okay," he says, "Okay. What's going to happen?"

"Well, Rei had the idea," Amber says, slapping her hands together with a grin.

"You...know Rei."

All six, together, confirm his fears.

"We're Pen Pals!"

Something drops into the pit of Shinji's stomach.

"Well, actually," Amber continues, "Continuing. Rei thought this'd be great because we've got another pen pal who really wants to meet you! How's that sound?"

"Mildly terrifying?"

Six pairs of hands grab him, yanking him to his feet and dragging him down the hallway which is not at all on any of the convention center maps, into a room which resembles a smaller cafeteria and depositing him in a seat.

He's been kidnapped by fangirls.

In retrospect, he always figured this would be the way it would end.

Then the other door opens, and Asuka is shoved in. Except that it isn't Asuka. It's someone in the same sort of plugsuit, albeit an imitation plugsuit, and he can tell the hair is a wig, and she's a little shorter than Asuka and a little thinner.

"Hey! What the Hell?"

And also not as polite. She catches his eye, staring at him and freezing before a pale hand reaches out through the ventilation duct and gently pushes her to the seat opposite Shinji.

"Oh," she says, "Oh...um...wow."

The girls sit her down, before exiting out the other doors.

"Um...okay," the girl says, "Well...my name's Dawn. I...uh...I've wanted to meet you for a while."

...

After the panel ended, Asuka found that Shinji wasn't responding to his transponder. Instead of panicking, which was her usual modus operandi, she decided to go and find him. Which has lead her into the main lobby of the convention center, where a good three dozen men dressed in white plastic armor with odd masks are fighting with another three dozen people of assorted genders in bad plastic forehead makeup, wielding plastic swords that resemble really dangerous boomerangs.

Avoiding them lead to her nearly taking a beach ball to the head

during the convention's Dodgeball game, which Rei had gotten involved in.

Dr. Ikari went on to host a panel about what a Pilot does, and Misato was hosting a panel about Pilot romances. As long as they don't show the security footage from two nights ago, they're happy. Of course, that doesn't help make up for the fact that she's running into a lot of cosplayers of herself, including one in Uri's plugsuit, with a lot of bandages who is pointing to random people and screaming that they're an Angel.

And then eating a live bug.

Very strange people, at this convention. It is almost as if the Ree organized it. Well, most likely it *was* the Ree that organized it. Asuka has often asked herself how this world was so different from the others they visited, and narrowed it down to Dr. Ikari being alive and eight insane half-Angel girls being given actual administrative power.

So it comes to no surprise that she finds an empty room not on the convention map filled with a circle of metal folding chairs.

Sighing, knowing that it would be here for a reason, Asuka sits in one of the chairs. And the floor promptly drops away, shrieking as she bounces around tunnels and vents and falls several floors into a series of drop away cushions.

And finally, she falls into a couch in the middle of a conference room three floors below. The group in the room, a mix of people in makeshift NERV uniforms and the white plastic armor which she is sure is not NERV regulation, stare at her.

"Um...hello?" she asks.

They continue staring at her. They whisper among themselves, their leader, a man in his 30's with a neck beard, turning to her.

"Are you here to help with the LARP?"

...

Shinji eventually suggested finding someplace more...inviting...to talk with his stalker. Much to his surprise, she agreed, as long as she was allowed to hold his hand so it looked like they were boyfriend and

girlfriend. Rather than risking a possible episode from a possible psychotic, he agreed. He's agreed to weirder demands from his sisters, after all.

She has been talking about herself for quite a while, about where she's from, where she's going to college, and so on and so forth. She lead them into the cafeteria and bought two sodas, sitting down with him at a table and...well, looking at him.

Part of him wonders if she's going to get a knife. Part of him wonders if this is all there is to it.

"So," she says, "I've talked myself blue in the face. What about you?"

He sighs, smiling.

"Well, not much that wasn't made public," he says, "I lived with my aunt and uncle for ten years, so my parents when they were able. Mom and Dad called me back to pilot the giant robot four months ago and I've been doing that since. It keeps me busy enough that I don't really do anything else."

"You don't have any hobbies?"

He shrugs.

"I play the cello every now and then," he says, "I haven't practiced in a while. I've been thinking of trying to write, but I'm not sure how much of my experience is classified. You're Rei's pen pal?"

Dawn nods.

"Yeah...um, we met online at a chat site," she says, shifting in her seat, "I was following the Angel attacks, found the site. Rei found me."

He nods.

"I told her my story, she suggested this. She paid for our plane tickets, rooms, and convention passes."

"Why?"

She smiles.

"Um...so I could thank you," she responds.

She smiles. It is quick, and warm, and he can see her eyes are wet.

"Um...it was hard to get away from all the preparations," she says, "I'm getting married in two weeks. I wanted to thank you for letting it happen. My boyfriend proposed to me after you saved his life. He said there was no time like the present."

He blinks, sitting up. Staring at her, she laughs, scratching the back of her head, obviously nervous and flustered, but continues anyway.

"We were on the outs," she says, "Then he almost died, but you saved his life, so when they got into port he called me up and asked me to marry him. He told me everything that happened, and Rei said I should meet you to thank you, because she said you sometimes forget that you're doing a good thing."

"Where does your boyfriend work?" he asks.

"On the UN Pacific fleet," she says, "He's stationed on the *Over the Rainbow*. You saved his life when you killed the Angel that was attacking the fleet, and I really wanted to thank you."

She leans in and pecks him on the cheek, before quickly walking back into the crowd. Staring, watching her go, Shinji leans back in the chair, tilts his head back, and sees Asuka standing behind him.

"How much did you hear?" he asks.

"All of it," she says, leans down, and pecks him on the lips, "R-Rei's a good s-sister when she wants to be."

...

The doors to the lab open, and Kyoko stares at the still sphere of Angelic crap on the scale before walking in, leveling her gaze at Katsuhito as he holds out a wrapped candy on a stick.

"Lollipop?" he asks.

"That's not very sanitary."

"And this is an alien entity with motivations and abilities far beyond mortal ken. I think we can drop the scientific method's more niggling details for the moment," he responds, still sucking on his candy, "Are we prepared?"

She nods, staring at the material on the scale.

"Unit 03 will be ready for activation at 0945 tomorrow morning," she says, "None of that is going *in* to Unit 03, is it?"

"Of course not. You made your case very clearly to the Committee, Dr. Sohryu. The very thought of an Angel taking control of an Evangelion is not something I want to see happen."

"And what enhancements have been done to Unit 03?"

He raises an eyebrow, chuckling and tapping up a holographic screen.

"Incremental enhancements," he says "Based on the Evangelions' performance against ADAM. It would be a good idea to have an Anti-ADAM Evangelion, after all. We incorporated some devices researched at NERV-Alaska's R&D facilities and some biological enhancements."

She stares at the hologram of Unit 03, folding her arms and narrowing her eyes.

"What's that?" she asks, pointing to a dark red spot on the cross section.

"That's from Bethany," he says, "Personal project I was working on based on the ADAM research they conducted there. We found some leftover biological matter which was neither human nor pattern blue, and found it had remarkable ability to conduct AT Fields."

"I see."

She nods, as the doors open again and a youth with red hair and blue/red eyes walks in, still adjusting the blue and green plugsuit.

"Ah, Pilot Sohryu," Ikari says, Kyoko turning and her face softening with a smile, "How goes the preparations?"

"All is proceeding accordingly, Professor," he says, and turns to Kyoko, "Mother, have you seen Nagisa around? We haven't been able to find him."

"Nagisa is occupied," Ikari responds, clearing his throat and smiling, "We will leave it at that."

Kyoko narrows her eyes. Ikari shrugs, closing the hologram and turning back to his research. Throwing up her arms and muttering something in german, she walks out. Uri glances between the two, shrugs, and follows her.

...

The activation test was the next morning, so she decided to hit the sack when she got back to the hotel room. Unfortunately, Katsuragi decided to take her out for a few drinks in honor of them making it through the convention, so after two beers she is more than a little buzzed as she slides the key card through the door and enters the suite.

Pieter is sitting on his bed, reading a novel. His PDA is at his side and his uniform jacket is on the chair, and Yui gets a glimpse of the fact that Pieter is in damned good shape for a man in his forties. Not bulging or ripped, but well toned, streamlined and she can see his defined shoulders and stocky frame through his white t-shirt.

"How was the convention?" he asks with a smile.

She smiles back, blinking.

"Fine," she says, and sighs, "Enlightening. Kei asked me if she was my favorite.

He winces.

"What'd you do?"

"I told her she was," Yui says, "I guess it's true. I've never really thought of the girls in terms of favorites. None of the other Ree would care and would probably cheer Kei on if she told them, and Ichi just likes me as her Mommy."

"And Shinji?"

"I haven't had the same hand in raising him that I have with the girls," she sighs, shaking her head, "After this blow up I'm lucky he still talks to me."

He gets up, book open and face down on his bed, walking over and putting a hand on her shoulder.

"He's not like that," he says, "You know that. You weren't being anything other than a typical mom with him, and if I were in your situation I probably would have done the same. Don't beat yourself up over it, okay?"

She nods, patting him on the cheek.

"Okay," she says, "We need to be up early tomorrow. Activation test is at 9:30."

"Good. After that, Kyoko and I are going to get a bite to eat. Want to join us?"

She smiles, tightly, nodding as he walks back to the bed and flops onto it.

"Sounds good," she says, and grabs her suitcase, pulling out a silk nightgown that she curses herself for packing, "Sounds good."

Exiting into the bathroom, she begins changing, Kei's conversation still at the forefront of her mind. Mentally she's started comparing him to her husband. But she isn't attracted to him at all, she tells herself.

Right?

...

The next morning. 0900. Touji and Hikari were given VIP seats overlooking the deep underground chamber that serves as the activation site for Unit 03. Touji is already uneasy, watching the massive black, green highlighted thing in front of them, tightly holding Hikari's hand. She won't say it, but she doesn't like it. She doesn't like those *things*, especially since what happened to her sister.

"Hello."

They turn. Annette walks over, sitting next to them, folding her hands in her lap and dressed in a maid uniform.

"Hi," he says, glancing and Hikari and shrugging, "You are..."

"I am Annette, Mr. Nagisa's attendant," she says, "You are Shinji's friends, correct?"

They both nod.

"Good," she says, and sighs, "Has anyone seen him? I know Aunt Yui's not happy with him missing, but Asuka is already in Zwei from what I was told."

Touji blinks.

"Shinji's missing?" he asks, "Huh. Thought he was already in his Eva. What about Ayanami?"

Annette shrugs.

"Rei said she was going to look for him," Hikari says, "He probably got lost. Kei and Rei should be able to find him pretty easily. They won't be lost for too long. So, you said...Aunt Yui?"

Annette nods, standing up and bowing slightly.

"Correct," she says, "My name is Annette Ikari. I'm Shinji's cousin from Okayama. I've lived with Mr. Nagisa for the last nine years."

They both blink.

"You don't look a thing like him," Touji responds, earning an elbow to the ribs from Hikari.

"I inherit from my mother. She's American. I understand you two are good friends with Rei?"

They nod. Annette smiles, seeing his hand surrounding Hikari's.

"Yeah," Touji says, and quickly grins, "Rei was sort of responsible for setting us up. When the Third Angel attacked, we sort of ended up in the crossfire because my sister wandered out of the shelter and I had to chase her. Then I found the rocket launcher and-"

The air horns cut him off. In the pit, Unit 02 takes position, holding out its hands as the green along its red armor glows in time with its extended AT Field, four eyes glowing.

"Ah. They're beginning," Annette says, and sits down.

...

Yui paces, arms folded and staring at the immobile Unit 01. Where is he, she thinks. He isn't answering his cell phone, he isn't at the site. Surely, Asuka can handle the Unit 03 activation if something goes wrong, but still...

"Rei and Kei are both looking for him," Kyoko says, patting her

shoulder, "If something's wrong, you have two superhumans protecting him. Right now, we need to focus."

Yui nods, walking from the Cage and towards the test site's Pinbrow box, taking position next to her father as a glance is exchanged between the two.

"We're ready," Katsuhito says, clearing his throat, "Spencer, your status?"

"*The trade show is underway,"* the video image of Xavier Spencer says, a visibly uncomfortable Mana behind him, "*PAWN system is set if anything wrong."*

"Fuyutsuki?" Yui asks.

Another image appears, Kozou Fuyutsuki appearing in front of a nondescript building on the surface.

"*In position, Yui. And monitoring."*

Yui nods to Kyoko. In the distance, the white cylinder of the Entry Plug inserts itself into the back of Unit 03's neck.

...

He grips the controls. A tight smile comes across his face. His sister is watching in Zwei, and he can't be happier for her. He wonders where Ikari is, especially considering some rumors he's heard about him and Asuka, but dismisses them. This will go well, then he will be returning to Tokyo-3 with Annette.

"*Begin Entry Sequence. Releasing muscle locks. Pilot, please specify console language."*

"German," he states.

"*Roger. Second stage beginning. Setting Plug depth to 1.81. Begin LCL ionization."*

His mother's face appears in the corner of his eye.

"*Uri, we're ready to begin third stage. Are you ready?"*

He smiles, rolling his palms over the butterfly controls.

"Of course. Ready when you are, Mother."

Kyoko nods, and her face disappears. The A-10 connectors in his hair sparks, the lights at the back of his hands glowing.

"*Four Child recognized. Synchronization at 87%. Unit 03 has activated."*

...

A series of cheers breaks out in the Pinbrow box. Kyoko visibly relaxes, letting out a breath she was holding in for far too long as Pieter squeezes her shoulder, smiling. Hands folded, Yui glances at the two and at Unit 03, smiling herself as Katsuhito continues staring at it.

"What is it?" Yui asks.

"I keep wondering about those enhancements," he says, "A biological enhancement we put in Unit 03."

Yui grabs his arm, turning her to him.

"What enhancements?"

"Biological in nature," he says, swatting away her arm, "The Chairman had me install these into Unit 03 to make it more effective if ADAM returned."

Yui stares at him. She turns to the operators to order them to abort the test.

Alarms split the air. Kyoko's breathing stops as the ground underneath them shakes, the familiar danger signs flashing all over the computer screens.

"Blue Pattern detected in Unit 03," one of the technicians reads off, "Unit 03's activated its S2 engine!"

"Shit," Pieter breathes, "Asuka, move to intercept! Restrain Unit 03 and remove the Entry Plug!"

The ground rumbles. The shockwave throws them off their feet, the glass cracking as Unit 03 straightens up, eyes glowing yellow as the green pipping shifts and begins to glow white.

"Ikari!" Kyoko yells, grabbing Katsuhito by the collar, "Did you put that Angel in there?"

"No! All of it's accounted for in my lab!"

You are, all of you, garbage.

"It's not an Angel," Yui says, climbing to her feet as Unit 03 breaks free of its restraints, the locks around its jaw beginning to tear, "It's a *Cherubim."*

...

...

You are, all of you, garbage.

You have debased the sacred site of the Father.

You have ended your world through your own curiosity.

You have defiled the cosmic order through your own hunger for knowledge and power.

But now you will find some answers are not worth knowing.

The secrets you have judged worthy of your attention have now decided you are worth theirs.

I am the Secret of God.

Angel of Mysteries.

I am Raziel.

I am here.

...

Breaking free of the restraints, Unit 03 throws back its head and roars. The ground around it ripples as its AT Field comes to life, the armor beginning to burn at the lines of white as with a thrust of its legs, it launches itself at Unit 02.

Chapter 64: Hallelujah Beatdown

For an old man, Professor Ikari can run. The moment they figured out what they were dealing with, he made a quick exit, sprinting across the base as the battle between Unit 03 and Zwei shakes the flooring beneath him, sprinting nearly a kilometer at full speed and skidding to a stop in one of the other Cages, where a form of backup was stored.

"God bless automated systems," he says, bathed in the white glow of the device before him, hovering gently upon its crane lift before the open chest of the recipient.

Click.

He sighs, feeling the cold barrel pressed against his shoulder, and cocks his head to see Misato Katsuragi behind him.

"Lieutenant Colonel, I found it odd you weren't at the activation test."

"Yeah, well, Dr. Sohryu asked me to keep an eye on you," Misato responds, looking past him to see the prone form of the deactivated Go-kun, "Any reason I should trust you, 06?"

"Lorenz Kihl is a blood thirsty maniac who tricked me into installing a Cherubim into Unit 01 so he could get a measure of payback on my daughter," Katsuhito explains, walking from Misato to the main console on the catwalk overlooking Go-kun, "Usually, that man is subtle. Now he's not. I can only assume either age is catching up with him or he's gone completely insane, but in any case I assumed something may go wrong."

The glow becomes brighter. Misato looks up, past Katsuhito, seeing the large gray sphere with the pulsing white light at the center, channeled through the pinhole at the center as the plates hum with concentric circles of blue light. At either side are grooves, almost as if designed to be held by Evangelion-scaled hands.

"What is that?" she asks, idly lowering her gun.

"The prototype S2 Engine," he responds, flipping switches on the console as Go-Kun's chest armor opens, revealing a cavity surrounded by wire mesh and gray flesh designed for the device to fit in, "Based on your father's notes. The Angels run on a similar mechanism, using the power of perpetuating spirals to generate energy from nothing. It

creates potential and then exploits that potential."

The lift lowers, slowly moving the sphere into the cavity, wires connecting to it automatically, the braces holding it in the chest glowing as the glow begins to throb.

"It can create unlimited power. Turn an artificial life form into a God," Katsuhito says, as the chest armor clamps shut, "Normally, I would never put it into an Eva on a whim. But from what I can tell, this one is firmly on our side."

He begins flipping switches. The computer screen flashes with new readings.

"Power feeds set," he says, "Locks 1, 2, 3 disengages. By the way, cover your eyes."

He throws his arm up in front of his face, Misato turning and ducking as the chest glows and white lines of light flow over Go-kun, the hum of the machinery and throbbing of the generator overshadowed by the deafening roar that shakes the catwalk and nearly knocks them both off their feet.

"**Ah. That feels good.**"

A whir of the drill starting up, as the two look up. Visor glowing brighter than it ever has, Go-kun lowers his head, a blast of steam escaping his vents.

"Go-kun! About time you woke up!" Misato shouts, a smile on her face despite herself.

"**I have been monitoring the audio feeds, even in a deactivated state. So, you have traded out my N2 engine for the S2 engine?**"

"Desperate times," Katsuhito explains, "The Fourth Cherubim has taken over Unit-03 and trapped Dr. Sohryu's son inside it. You're the most likely choice to stop it."

"And for that, you've given me an upgrade," Go-kun says, and tilts his head, "**I like the way you think, Professor. I need a pilot.**"

"Rei's MIA, so's Shinji and Kei," Misato says, growling, "Suzuhara and Horaki are potentials, right? Can you use them as a pilot?"

Go-kun tilts his head forward. The entry plug extends.

"**I have a better idea.**"

Chapter 64: Hallelujah Beatdown

The two men in black suits, holding their pistols at ready run through the warehouse, aiming the laser sights as they breathe hard, panic evident on their faces. Slowly walking through the warehouse, silent in their steps, they stop, holding up their guns.

"Did we lose her?" one asks, holstering his gun.

"I think so," the other answers.

They are proven wrong in the form of the pale fist that bursts through the metal divider behind them, grabbing one of them by the tie and slamming his face against the wall before the entire divider is kicked, sending both it and the man into the far wall as the other ducks underneath.

The sixteen year old girl with blue hair and red eyes begins walking towards him, slowly and steadily, her eyes glowing as the air pulses around her with her breath.

"Where is he," Kei demands, cracking both sets of knuckles as she balls her hands into fists, "Tell me. Now."

He draws his gun as the other climbs out from behind the wreckage, both shooting at her. She ducks under, blurring before appearing in one, an uppercut to the stomach lifting him off his feet before she charges, carrying him into the second and all of them through the wall and to the next side, tossing them off and letting momentum carry them into a set of crates which collapse around them.

The doors on the far side open. Several more of the Section 2 agents enter, five of them in total. One of them is holding a barely conscious, bruised, and bleeding Shinji by the collar. All of them freeze as they see Kei, who narrows her eyes and charges.

She leaps in mid run, spinning around and catching one across the face with the heel of her shoe, sending him spinning through the air as she grabs Shinji by the belt, tossing him clear as they draw their guns, bullets reflected upwards off an AT Field as she kicks high, catching

one in the chin as she pounds one in the chest, grabbing two by the ties and slamming their heads together before vaulting off them and slamming both heels into the last's chest.

Standing up as he rolls to a stop, she begins advancing on him, clenching her fists before she charges.

...

The progressive knife extends, jamming into Unit-03's wrist as Zwei, on Asuka's command, delivers a vicious headbutt to the black Evangelion's face, caving in the nose before kneeing it in the gut.

"Mother," Asuka yells, "What happened to Uri?"

"*The Angel is blocking any communications to and from the Entry Plug,*" Kyoko responds, appearing in Asuka's right hand vision, "*Asuka, break the Evangelion's arms and legs and cut out the core!*"

"What will happen to Uri?"

"*He can heal, Asuka, but if you don't stop the Angel he could die! Quickly!*"

She's never heard Mother this worried, Asuka thinks. She's never been this concerned before. She knows how Mother was worried about this test, but to see her nightmares come true like this...

Banishing the thought, she wills Zwei forward. The second knife deploys, stabbed into the Eva's wrist, both hands flopping useless from severed connections as she silently hopes Uri isn't suffering the same.

Forcing it back, she grits her teeth. Zwei is growling in her ear, trying to connect its identification of the ANGEL with its identification of the Evangelion. The AT Field presses against the creature's, eroding it as she reaches to snap the Evangelion's spine and render it- and hopefully not her brother- immobile.

Which is when the Cherubim's eyes glow blue. Multiple orange fields shimmer into existence in front of Unit-02 before extending like a spring, slamming Zwei against the far wall as Asuka screams, her connection to the Evangelion making her feel the shot to the chest.

Quickly, quicker than it should be able to, Unit-03 dashes across the testing ground, grabbing hold of the Pinbrow box exterior and tearing

it off, glaring down at the assembled scientists, scannng over them, sniffing the air before centering its gaze on Annette.

I. KAR. I.

The voice roars in their heads, between their ears as the Eva bends down, locking eyes with Yui as she stands in front of her niece.

"Back off!" she yells.

MO. TH. ER.

The air shimmers around it, the air in the box beginning to ripple as its AT Field forms into a battering ram.

KILL.

Which is when the green, flame decal'ed fist slams into the Evangelion's jaw as Unit-05 grabs it, forcing it back.

"Go-kun?" Yui yells, "Rei, is that you?"

"*A LITTLE BUSY, YUI!"*

Yui's jaw drops open. Pieter tilts his head.

"*Katsuragi?"* Kyoko screams.

In the Entry Plug, hands gripping the butterfly controls, Misato roars. Behind her, hanging onto the seat for dear life, Katsuhito screams as Unit-03 snaps, Go-kun's massive hand wrapped around its throat as it forces it back from the Pinbrow box, the humming of the S2 engine sending waves of power through the LCL.

The A-10 connectors on her head crackle, the massive hand releasing before pounding Unit-03's face with a gargantuan punch, shoulder mounts opening open to spray the Evangelion's face and chest with bolts of energy, forcing it back.

"You're not trained," Katsuhito says, swallowing hard as the Eva charges, "You can't project an AT Field like a Child can!"

"Watch me!"

The Eva charges Go-kun, hands first. Ducking down, the four legged Eva bobs out of the way, bringing up its fore legs into the Eva's gut, dropping its elbow into Unit 03's back before grabbing it by the neck

and hurling it across the testing ground.

"I taught the Children how to fight, Professor," Misato growls, willing Go-kun forward, "C'mon, *bitch!* I kicked your *Daddy's* ass!"

Her voice booms through the speakers. The head of the black Evangelion cranes, eyes glowing as it rises, the two circling.

RE ME M BER.

It snarls, falling onto all fours, baring its blood red, boulder size teeth.

KILL. KILL. FA TH ER.

"You hear that, to?" she asks.

"Yes. The Cherubim's communicating. It went after Annette and Yui, now it's interested in you. I didn't want to think that a nigh-omnipotent alien could be petty, but there it is."

She cranes her head towards him.

"Clue me in, Doc."

"It wants Revenge, Katsuragi," Katsuhito says, "The Cherubim are out to kill anyone with the last name Ikari, and I think it might be after *you,* to. Because you were there when ADAM was stopped."

Roaring, bellowing, Unit 03 charges. In a flash of red and green, Unit 02 is on it, grabbing at the back of its neck, grabbing at the armor plate protecting the entry plug.

"Asuka, hold it down! I'm going for a disable shot!"

"Okay, Misato!"

The arms of Unit-03 turn to rubber, wrapping around itself before the hands wrap around Unit-02's neck. Inside the Entry Plug, Asuka chokes, feeling the distinct impressions around her throat as the Eva's head turns completely around, shrieking as its eyes bore into her-

And she feels the rage behind it. Feels the hate in its gaze as it bares down on her, Zwei roaring in her ears as the blackness begins to creep on her vision.

And Go-kun's fist smashes into the Eva's face, sending it off.

"No more dicking around," Misato growls, Go-kun advancing, "Go-kun! Finish him off!"

"**Right! Let's see how this upgrade works!**"

The four feet plant into the floor. Grapple hooks fire off from Go-kun's shoulders, rooting it to the floor as Unit-03 snarls, building up speed in a charge.

"**Finishing strike!**"

Go-kun's chest armor opens. The glow of the fully powered S2 engine bathes the room.

"**MEGA SMASHER!**"

The blast of light fills the room, the inhabitants of the Pinbrow box covering their eyes as Unit-02 throws up its AT Field. The beam of light lances from Go-kun's chest, slamming into Unit-03's face, pulping the meat and vaporizing the armor before throwing it across the room, smashing into and through the far wall before it collapses, lifeless, to the floor of the testing ground.

"**Unit has been restrained,**" Go-kun says, closing his chest, "**Unit-02 has lost power. I am retrieving the Second Child, first.**"

...

Consciousness returns, the black retracting to the corners of her vision before disappearing completely. Gripping the controls and concentrating, the metal layers of the entry plug fade, becoming a transparent view of the outside world.

"*Asuka, report!*" her Mother yells.

"I'm...I'm f-fine," she says, "I m-made mental contact with the Cherubim."

Misato appears in the corner of her vision.

"*You alright?*"

"Th-they...It *hated* me," Asuka whispers, "It just *hated* me. Wh-what are

those things?"

...

She ducks under the gunfire, kicking off her foot and swinging into a spin kick to the agent's face, launching off of him to grab another by the tie and swing him into another, landing in a crouch as she dives between the remaining two. Grabbing their ties, she pulls them into a mutual headbutt, punching one in the gut, kicking the other in the face, tossing one against the wall as her fists become a blur, repeatedly slamming into his chest and gut before an uppercut launches him into the air and landing on one of the freight containers.

Shinji is drifting in and out of consciousness, she notes as she approaches him, her brother lying in a heap on the warehouse floor. Quickly, she snaps the bindings on his wrist, checking a pulse and finding it still there, making sure he is alive as she checks over the forehead and feels for the bump that would be evidence of a concussion. Finds none.

Then she hears the pump. Eyes dart up as the Section 2 who sneaked up on her aims his shotgun at Shinji's head. She reacts. Her fist darts out, his arm turning to jelly when it hits, the shotgun flying out of his hands as the bones turn to shards and powder. Grabbing the gun by the handle, she swings it forward and depressed the trigger.

The agent's head disappears. Blood and brain paint her face and blouse as the agent falls to the ground in front of her, the fumes wafting from the barrel of the pump action weapon.

Looking up, Kei's eyes dart open. At the other end of the warehouse, Rei stares at her, seeing her surrounded by the unconscious and dead. And Rei charges.

...

The ground rumbles. Headless, the fingers of Unit-03 twitch, digging up metal plating as the green jet strips on its armor flash white and illuminate the room. The metal around it bends as the giant rises, fresh flesh bursting from the neck, forming into something resembling a newborn infant's screaming face before covering itself with silver metal.

The metal parts with a roar, the the now ridged white mouth lining itself with two overbearing fangs, tusks hanging down over the mouth as the black armor burns itself white, fingers extending into two claws as tendrils burn into the wall behind it, sucking the metal into its growing form.

Raziel rises, towering over Go-kun and Zwei, before the third eye opens on its forehead and with a burst of its now back parted legs it thrusts itself up through the ceiling and into the city above.

"He's heading into the city," Yui breathes, tapping the comm, "Asuka! Katsuragi! Stop it!"

"*You heard her,"* Misato's voice booms, "*Asuka, first priority is retrieving the Entry Plug! I have point!"*

Go-kun's jet strips open up, white flame building up.

"*Let's roll!"*

Go-kun grabs Zwei by the arm, and with a blast of flame, sound, and force, the two Evangelions launch into the hole, ascending into the city in pursuit.

...

Kei freezes in place, trying to process the scene before her, broken out of the trance as Rei's fist slams into her jaw and sends her flying, spinning, across the warehouse and landing on her shoulder, bouncing before slamming into the far wall. Her own AT Field took the brunt of the impact, only the inertia carrying her like it did.

The main damage, though, comes from the realization that Rei just hit her. Of course, it was rather a bad situation she was in right now anyway, but that her own sister just struck her...

Well, that couldn't stand. Her nostrils flare as she flips back up, catching Rei's wrist in her charge, Rei's battlecry halting with a warble as Kei slams her fist into her gut.

Releasing Rei's wrist, she ducks, spinning, slamming her elbow into Rei's stomach, two palm strikes to the face causing her to falter before Kei ducks low and swings into a rising uppercut, sending her flying.

Another burst of movement. She sees two more entering, red eyes glowing gold as the smaller figure holds up something in front of her.

"Kuba! Sicc'er!"

And the Israfim in Hikari's arms lets loose a blast of light from its outstretched arms, smacking her in the face with the force of a tossed baseball, making her stumble back as Touji tackles her legs.

Both drop to the ground. Touji, for all his bluster and all his strength, is still human. Kei, however, has many abilities beyond human, least of all the fact that she is double jointed. Twisting, she kicks Touji off her legs and up, flipping up and catching him by the leg before slamming him into the ground.

He rolls to his feet, punching Kei in the face, making her stumble back before spinning and hitting him with a backhand, her hands a blur as she repeatedly slaps him before sweeping out his legs and driving her fist in between his legs to send him flying across the warehouse where he lands in a choking heap at Hikari's feet.

"Ah...my *balls*..."

A series of energy blasts hits Kei in the face, forcing her back as Hikari advances, holding Kuba by the armpits as she yells something about 'Gatling mode.'

Kei blurs. She ducks under, grabbing Hikari's collar and yanking her shirt over her head, spinning her around and kicking her aside as she turns to Touji, who finds himself holding a safety cone which he lamely holds in front of his head.

Which is when Rei descends from the freight containers and tackles Kei, grabbing her in a headlock. The two fall, Rei's arms locked around her throat, Kei grabbing at her as Rei drags her down.

"Rei, stop!"

Which is when they notice Shinji is standing, supported on a freight container. Spitting out a wad of blood from his mouth, he nearly collapses as Hikari rushes over, idly dropping Kuba to help him stand and fix her blouse at the same time.

"Rei," Shinji gasps, grabbing at his side, "Kei was *saving* me. Whoever those guys were, they weren't Section 2."

"They were sent by the Committee to capture and kill Shinji," Kei says, voice level, wiping the blood from her lip, "I found out. The Chairman attempted to goad me into attacking him. I refused."

She pauses. She allows a faint smile to cross her face.

"I believe my words to him were, 'Kiss my ass, you lying sack of shit.'"

Rei squeals, clapping her hands together.

"Great!" she says, "Um...sorry about punching you, Kei."

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," she says, "You did find me after I was forced to kill one of them."

She pauses again. The warehouse goes silent, Hikari averting her eyes from the carnage, carrying Shinji over to Touji as he grimaces.

"There's an Angel," Hikari says, over her shoulder, "Rei, Kei, can you get us to Unit 01?"

Kei nods. Ripping off her sleeve, she uses it to clean the blood from her face, walking past Rei and grabbing Shinji, tossing him onto her shoulder.

"Rei," Kei says, "Keep ahead of us. Make sure we are not ambushed."

Shinji grimaces. He didn't see the carnage before. The groans of the dead and dying and wounded. He never knew, or at least never was confronted with the sort of carnage his sisters could cause before. And then Kei begins running, Hikari and Touji behind her, as Rei ascends into a ventilation duct.

...

It emerges with an eruption of steel and cement, somewhere around 500 feet below the surface, in one of the underground shopping districts of the arcology. Consuming the metal and concrete around it, it continues to grow, exceeding 250 feet tall as it hisses through its tusked mouth, automated turrets built into the walls peppering it with shells that shake the sides of the reverse cone before Raziel leapt once more for the surface.

It breaks through the closing glass dome, leaping nearly a mile before slamming down with enough force to create a crater, the lights of Las

Vegas blinking in the distance. Eyes glowing, it turns towards there, steam escaping its blackened lips.

Right when it hears the whirling of the drill, turning and raising its AT Field just as Go-kun slams into it, the drill shredding the first two layers of the field as Unit 02 charges, green eyes glowing, the pipping of the red and white armor shining as the fields fold back in, a tug of war with the Cherubim as the red Evangelion advances.

"*Katsuragi!"*

Misato looks up, grimacing as she sees Kaji's frantic face appearing in her right eye's view, gunfire in the background.

"Kaji! What is it?"

"*Spencer's gone insane! He's activated the entire NHIS arsenal and it's heading your way to attack the Cherubim!"*

"Define 'insane' and why you're worried about the extra help!"

"*The orders are to purge the entire area,"* he explains, "*That includes New Vegas. I've counted one dozen JA PAWN robots and two TRIDENTs heading your way, Misato. I'm enroute as soon as I can find Mana-*"

The image degrades into static. Growling, she orients Go-kun towards the marching wall of lights and metal, clicking on the zoom. One dozen robots as tall as Jet Alone Prime, their arms segmented like chains, marching in lockstep towards them, flanked by two bipedal, bent over masses of blue and silver that she remembers from the Iruel incident. Grunting, she turns slightly to Ikari, staring at the advancing force.

"I always knew Spencer was unstable," he says, "I just never presumed he was this unstable. If we live through this, there will be *Hell* to pay."

"You had nothing to do with this?"

"Katsuragi, I swear on my wife's *soul* that I did not plan this," he says, "Aim for the shoulder joints on the PAWNs. The mobility for the arms means that they can't be as armored as the rest. If you can blast the N2 reactors, they shut down."

"No explosion?"

"N2 reactor's don't make mushroom clouds."

She nods, Asuka's face appearing in her eye as Go-kun charges past Raziel, still struggling against Unit-02's AT Field.

"Asuka! Hold it off! I've got the armor to deal with!"

...

As Go-kun charges, Unit-02 draws its knife, one hand extended as the two walls of barely visible force tear up the dessert ground between the two titans, Asuka's eyes glowing in time with Zwei's. A final push, the onboard computer chiming as her synchronization continues rising, and the wall seems to push further and further towards Raziel.

And then Raziel's third eye glows and the world becomes a blur, the force lifting Unit-02 up and tossing it, Asuka screaming as her Eva is tossed like a rag doll.

Slamming at the edge of the arcology, part of the metal dome bends, collapsing inward towards the miles deep tunnel behind her. Slowly, Zwei rises, as Raziel continues to advance, tendrils of silver yanking pieces of metallic debris from around it, melding with its armor as it continues to grow and shift. Gritting her teeth, she wraps her hands around the butterfly controls. She knows that, by herself, she can't get through the AT Field. Even with Misato, she can't get through it, not like this. She hates herself for it, but there is a way she can stop it, or at least hold it off until some help can arrive.

"Zwei," she whispers, "If I keep synching with you during it...I-I can take the brunt of it. I c-can keep y-you from being h-hurt. Wh-when I do it, you h-have to target the Angel and you have to *stop* it. Do you understand?"

MASTER?

She closes her eyes. She yelled at Mother for the same thing not too long ago. But like Mother would say...

"Time for a change."

She looks up, baring her teeth as she stares at the advancing form of the Cherubim, and speaks.

"Release restraining bolts," she says, "Authorize full enhancements. Automatic Emergency Response Mode engaged. Activate *Unlimited*

Mode. Password..."

The plug turns red. The Core shudders.

"*The Beast."*

...

Deep underground, in the command station of NERV-Vegas, Kyoko's mouth drops open as the status report of Zwei is shouted out by the attending technicians.

"No," she whispers, "No no *no.* Asuka, please tell me you didn't just do that-"

"*Restraining bolts released! Unit-02 is abandoning human form!"*

The ground beneath them shudders, Pieter catching her as she loses her footing. Yui is already shouting orders, as the battle between Go-kun and NHIS's entire mobile forces begins. For a moment, she considers collapsing, watching as the readings for Unit-02 go haywire, fearing the prospect of losing both her children in one day.

And then, there is a single shout, and a ray of hope.

"*Unit-01 has activated!"*

...

The jet strips on Zwei's shoulders explode, two green rods twisting out from beneath the armor, the entire form of the titan shuddering as it pitches forward, eight similar rods bursting from its back as he collapses onto its hands and knees. In the Entry Plug, blood pours freely from Asuka's nose and ears, droplets hanging in the LCL as she grits her teeth, glaring at the advancing form of the Cherubim as her eyes shift towards red, from the blood vessels bursting and the newly realized connection to the Core.

"*I*...c-can take th-this..."

Armor around the body begins to loosen. Massive feral muscle uncoils, Zwei's limbs shifting, breaking and reforming as her arms spasm.

"C-can't give up, Zwei-...O-only th-thing...we c-can d-do th-this..."

Massive fingers dig into the ground. Zwei's eyes light up, glowing white in the twilight as the burst of steam from its nostrils loosens the jaw locks. Swinging back its head, the jaw armor swings open and he roars in time with Asuka's scream.

And Zwei charges. It takes off in a blur, needle like teeth bared as his eyes glow and the pulsing of his unrestrained Core ripples through the LCL. Releasing the right control, Asuka brings her fist back, her words replaced with a berserker scream as Zwei mirrors her action exactly, and swings it forward as they come within range of Raziel.

The fist slams through, shattering the AT Field and puncturing the chest armor, barely missing the core as Raziel shrieks, Zwei's feet slamming into the stomach, leaping over the Cherubim before flipping in mid air and catching it in the face, shattering armor and sending it down as Zwei falls into a crouch, sniffing the air and turning towards the rising Raziel.

A bellow and he charges, running on all fours, tackling him, bringing up his arm to strike and caving in armor before a pulse of Raziel's eyes launch Zwei into the air and down the tunnel of New Vegas, Raziel leaping in pursuit.

The giant dives after the beast, grappling with each other as they bounce off the sides, the crushed buildings absorbed into Raziel's ever growing mass, Zwei's teeth digging into the armor and ripping out chunks of flesh as Asuka's cries become a berserker scream before they both slam into the NERV base beneath, slamming into an empty hangar as Zwei flips off.

In the plug, Asuka blinks. Blood pours freely from her nose and ears, her breathing heavy and labored as she tries to keep her mind from shutting down. With a roar, she charges, Zwei charging in tune, the pulses of Raziel's AT Field washing over like water before a vicious claw strike severs Raziel's arm, the titan shrieking, swinging a club like limb that the animalistic Eva ducks under, striking Raziel's bent backwards knee and climbing atop his back, grabbing him by the head and ripping off the back plate of its neck with its teeth.

Reaching in, Zwei thrusts the arm in to the elbow through the shifting, gelatinous mass, slowly pulling out as it growls and rumbles, the

tendrils eating away at the armor of the arm as it pulls out the mass, the entry plug in Zwei's hand as the light in Raziel's eyes flickers.

And Asuka sees the clock in her right hand side reading 00:15.

"Zwei," she screams, "P-pull! G-get Uri out of there!"

The timer pauses. Zwei roars, bracing both feet against Raziel's back as the severed arm twitches on the ground, leaking pulverized gray liquid...

And launches itself, slamming into Zwei's gut. Asuka coughs up blood as Zwei's grip goes slack, the arm reattaching itself to Raziel as it slashes Zwei across the face, angry red lines writing themselves on Asuka's cheek before Raziel reaches out and wraps its hands around Zwei's throat a single kick breaking Zwei's right leg. The Eva roars as Asuka screams, her own leg bending unnaturally as the pain breaks her concentration. Back slamming into the floor, blood flecks from her lips as she grabs at her throat, Zwei mirroring the action as Raziel holds Zwei down, bringing up its right hand before slamming into Zwei's face, Asuka screaming as she feels the hit, bruises dotting her cheeks and forehead, blackness edging out around her vision before the giant pauses.

And it begins reaching down, reaching for Zwei's eyes. She trembles, gurgling whimpers as the skin around her right eye shifts and descends, screaming as she feels the claws drying to pluck it out.

And then a purple and green blur slams into Raziel's face. The timer hits zero. And right before she passes out and the entry plug goes dark, she sees Unit-01 tackle Raziel, and hears Shinji's scream.

...

"*Synchronization holding at 270%. Access to all weapons granted.*"

He screams, urging Unit-01 on as the snapping visage of Raziel fills his view, head still swimming from the beating he was given earlier. In Unit-01's right hand, a large progressive dagger appears, accessed from the Dirac before being jammed into Raziel's neck, blue ichor painting the walls as Ichi follows his orders and keeps pressing forward, dragging grooves of Raziel's massive clawed feet along the ground.

There is radio chatter. Asuka is hurt bad, they tell him.

He slams them both through the far wall, slamming them through the New Vegas Cages, walls and debris eaten by the tendrils issued from Raziel's armor as he slams his now F-Type armored fists into Raziel's tusked face.

Screaming, Ichi screaming in tandem, he slams the Cherubim against the final wall, metal creating and inking into the armor of the creature, three eyes glowing balefully as the red armored fists slam repeatedly into the creature's face, breaking off tusks and armor with each pounding blow.

And then the fist stops right at Raziel's mouth. The tendrils wrap around the armor, tearing the F-Type armor from Unit-01 and adding its mass to Raziel's own. Two arms burst out of Raziel's chest, slamming into Unit-01's and sending it back, crashing through the walls as Raziel charges, grabbing Unit-01 by the head and slamming it like a battering ram into the walls and dragging it the length of the cages, claws digging into the underside of the head as Shinji screams.

It drops the Eva, marching over towards the prone form of Unit-02 and wrapping a hand around its head, picking it up as it walks back over to Unit-01.

Holding up the Eva by the head, holding the limp form of Zwei in its other, Raziel's three eyes glow before it leaps, clearing the entire tunnel of New Vegas and landing on the surface, idly tossing Zwei's defeated bulk aside and raising Unit-01 to eye level as it tilts its head, staring at it.

Unit-01 swings its fist. Off-handedly, Raziel grabs the arm by the wrist, and with no visible effort tears the arm off, Shinji screaming in the plug, opening his eyes as the blood droplets float in the LCL and he *realizes he can't feel his arm*

And Raziel brings its fist back and slams it into Unit-01's chest. The Eva goes flying, passing over New Vegas and slamming into the hillside near it. Deep underneath the chest armor, embedded in gray flesh, the red orb at the center of Unit-01 cracks.

And its task done, Raziel turns back to Unit-02.

...

"Oh no," Yui whispers, eyes trembling as she sees the readings from Unit-01 on New Vegas's Big Screen, the technicians shouting out numbers on the half circle raised platform as Katsuragi's battle with the NHIS forces goes badly, "He's cracked the Core."

Dropping readings. Backwards corrupted data. Numbers falling. All of it means one thing in her eyes.

Ichi is *dying.*

"No," she whispers, "No no no no *no.*"

Her hands ball into fists. At the other end of the command center, Rei and Kei have arrived, just in time to see Yui collapse to her knees, staring at the screen.

"Damn you," she growls, "Help them."

...

Ichi is crying. She's crying that it hurts. She's crying that it's going dark. That she can't help it anymore, that she's falling. Shinji tries to reassure, tries to tell her that he can protect her, but his lungs are collapsed and his vision is fading. He can hear the heartbeat in his ears slowing down, beat by beat by beat as he feels himself falling back.

His remaining hand twitches, the blood pooling in his eyes turning it red as he watches Raziel advance on Unit-02.

...

"Help them!" Yui screams, "I know you're in there, God *DAMN YOU!* I've given you *ENOUGH!* Now *HELP THEM!"*

Kei's gaze shifts between the numbers on the screen and her mother, Rei's expression uncharacteristically silent and stoic as Kei turns to her for some confirmation or reassurance but finds none.

"What do you know?" Kei asks.

...

His vision is a tunnel. He can feel himself fading away, dropping away as his heart begins its last beats. He's failed, he realizes. He's failed because he wasn't strong enough. He's failed because he couldn't stop it. He's failed because he couldn't protect them.

Raziel picks up Zwei. It pulls the head back, reaching for the entry plug. For Asuka.

He tries to reach out, he tries to act, but Ichi is still crying, her cries becoming weaker and weaker with every fading heartbeat.

One beat.

Then another.

Then another.

Weaker

And weaker

As the last

one

fades

away

and

so

does

he

.

.

.

.

Red. The plug filled with red.

"Asuka."

A beat.

"Ichi."

A beat...

A heartbeat. Red. The color of hate, opening.

"Give. Them. Back."

Chapter 65: The Beast

The red eyes open, flashing balefully as life is restored to the broken body. The throbbing pulse of the Core shakes the desert sands, the released power causing Raziel to drop Zwei as the green lines of Unit-01's armor glow baleful red.

"Unit-01 has re-activated!" one of the technicians announces, "Core activity is rising! Pilot synchronization has reached 315%! 360%!"

In the command center, Yui stands up, slowly. On the screen, Unit-01 has begun to rise, picking itself up like a puppet grabbing its strings, the massive form shimmering with unleashed force and renewed fury.

"He did it," Yui whispers.

Kyoko slowly approaches, placing her hand on Yui's shoulder.

"Ikari," she says, "What is that? What happened to Unit-01?"

Yui smiles, faintly. Pushing up her glasses, she allows herself a faint, hopeful look at the screen as the technician announces Shinji's synchonization has reached 400%.

"Berserker."

And on the surface, Unit-01 throws back its head as the jaw locks tear and shrieks. Raziel blurs, crossing the distance, leaping over the New Vegas arcology with claws outstretched, ready to finish the grisly task it started. All it does, is slam into the AT Field Unit-01 throws up with a wave of its hands, a slow growl escaping its throat.

A flash of light. A beam of energy lances out from the shoulder of Unit-01's missing arm, unfolding and becoming an arm of pure, shimmering light that it slowly levels at the Cherubim. The light folds out, folding and unfolding into a series of hexagonal tunnels standing between the purple titan and the hijacked Eva, and Raziel is given a moment to realize what is happening.

Right before it's launched into the sky.

Chapter 65: The Beast

The city shakes and he grabs a hold of the doorway, looking up and expanding his Overmind to sense it. Something has happened. Something momentous. But that does not matter now. Dialing back his senses to the human level, he blinks golden red eyes and turns back towards the crowd behind him, numbering in the hundreds.

No sooner did things go pear shaped with the test than dozens of young men and women in NERV uniforms appear, guiding the civilian population of New Vegas towards the emergency evacuation tunnels. Kaworu knows they are not NERV, though. A quick scan of their minds told him they were role players from the convention, organized by Miss Sohryu for such a charade in case things went wrong.

As a fortress city, New Vegas had a thankfully low population. The hundreds of thousands at most, but he cannot join the battle. The Mark 06 is in Berlin, for a project of his maker's. And it gnaws at the back of his mind that Kihl planned this. Kihl had him help them to put that thing in Unit-03, even if he didn't know what it was in its dormant state. Kihl knew and desired nothing more than vengeance.

And Zeruel. Zeruel is screaming in his ear to abandon human form and destroy the Cherubim.

"No," he says, eyes glowing as the hundreds march in lockstep behind him, "Not yet. Let's go!"

They walk behind him, their wills part of his. The fake NERV staff are evacuating the hotels and casinos, leading them through the tunnels towards the surface miles away. The battle rages above, and he knows Annette is down below in the base, safe, and Uri is...something is happening to him.

His concentration is broken. The people stop, looking about as they panic, in the middle of the street as Kaworu snaps back to reality. The girl who has the resemblance to Miss Sohryu looks up and screams, and Kaworu turns, his eyes flaring as they are forced back, the chunk of debris from the dome lip barely missing them.

And instead, it slams into a hotel.

Pearly gates open. A hundred and fifty souls depart the Earth, Kaworu's eyes going wide as his Overmind takes in each and every one of their faces. Children, as well. Innocents and bystanders.

This is not how it should be happening.

Kill the Cherubim, his brother repeats, **Abandon your flesh and destroy the abomination.**

"No," he whispers.

The tunnel is blocked off by the debris. Above him, gods battle. But today, he cannot join them.

"Everyone," he says, "Gather 'round me."

As one, they obey, pushed gently by his mind touching theirs. His feet leave the ground, his eyes flaring as he brings his S2 organ, his Core, to full life. A dome of light surrounds them, the air turning opaque, blocking out light, radiation, and force, as the dome becomes a sphere around him.

He can sense everything. Gravity, force, light, the atomic structure. And his AT Field closes completely

And blocks it out.

And in the blink of an eye, Kaworu and 387 civilians disappear and reappear hundreds of miles away.

...

Raziel lands, bouncing across the desert before picking itself up, rising, its armor dented and melted, its third eye flickering. Parts of it have melted from the heat and force, one of the claws on its right hand snapped off. It looks up, to see the advancing Unit-01, its jaw hanging open, its arm throbbing and pulsing.

A look, a glance, as the roar escapes Unit-01's throat. The eyes flash, and Raziel holds up its arms, forming a solid wall of light. That takes but a blink to vaporize before the Cherubim is sent flying, the blast punching a hole through it and painting the desert blue.

Raziel does not fall. The hole closes and he advances, charging, slamming into Unit-01 and sending them both back, sending them over the lip of the dome and into New Vegas itself.

Unit-01 roars. Slamming Raziel's head into the side of the arcology as they fall, it grinds metal and meat into the walls of the collapsing city.

Down they drop, through armor layers and abandoned city blocks,

reducing everything in their wake to dust and debris and lifeless waste. Fists pound, roars echoing through the pit, and Shinji Ikari screams.

But the Beast does not listen.

...

"Plug depth at 180!"

Yui snaps her gaze from the view screen to the technician, she and Kyoko trading a glance.

"He's entering the Core!" Kyoko says, "If he continues-"

"He won't be able to return to human form," Yui says, pushing past Kyoko and pushing the technician aside, activating the communications rig with the Eva, "Shinji! You have to calm down! What you're doing is extremely dangerous!"

The reply comes as a shriek, filling the speakers like a building static before, one by one, the speakers blow out, filling the control room with flying plastic and velvet, the subwoofer plate landing at Yui's feet. Which is just when the ceiling of the hangar caves in and Unit-01 drives Raziel head first into the ground.

Grabbing Raziel by the head, Unit-01 jams its fingers into the eyes, blue blood staining the armor as it lifts the Cherubim up, grabbing the creature's right arm and yanking it off.

Next comes the right leg, then the left leg, painting the hangar with blood and gore as the Beast roars, pounding flesh and armor before grabbing the enemy by the head and hurling it upwards. Raziel flies, crashing through the remaining armor layers, debris raining down in the hangar as Unit-01 pumps its knees and takes off.

The Cherubim flies through the remains of the convention center, sending steel and concrete raining below as Unit-01 vaults up the walls, landing in the desert as Raziel crashes in a heap. Falling to all fours, the Beast raises its nose, steam escaping its nostrils. It feels the weakness. Feels pain.

It knows what it must do.

It must feed.

Stomping towards the fallen Evangelion, towards Raziel, the Angel of Mysteries raises its remaining arm, the tendrils weakly flapping as the Beast grabs the arm and rips it off, swinging it like a club into the Cherubim's head. Pinning it to the ground by the head and torso, the Beast raises its head and roars before bringing it down upon its foe.

The southwest desert fills with the sounds of tearing flesh and rending metal. In the Command Center of New Vegas, Yui stares dumbstruck at the screen, Pieter and Kyoko staring in grim fascination as Kei turns visibly sick, grabbing a trash can and vomiting.

Tearing, ripping, the mind of the Beast turns feral, desiring only sustenance. Only blood, only flesh. Rearing back its head, it roars as the body of Raziel twitches, before diving down, ripping the red sphere from deep within the bloody mess, bringing its red, boulder sized teeth down as the red ichor flows from its jaws, swallowing the shards and flesh before seizing up.

It stands, stumbles back. Raising its head, the armor around it begins to tear and pop, exposing the glowing white flesh underneath as the crack along the Core mends. Roaring triumph, the Beast bays, howling. And then it turns back to Raziel. It can still sense the enemy.

Ripping apart the corpse, it reaches deep within, tossing aside the lifeless husk that was the head and pulling forth from meat and blood the white cylinder, its eyes glowing a baleful red in tune with its slow, menacing roar.

The Beast begins to squeeze, the metal yielding like paper against its clawed fingers, jets of LCL bursting out of the sides. The Entry Plug begins to collapse upon itself, folding in as the Beast roars in triumph, clenching its fist around it.

Which is when a blast of light slams into the side of its face, plasma blasts painting its side as it turns, dropping the collapsed Plug. With a wordless, animal, inarticulate cry, the Beast charges, ramming into Go-kun.

...

The ground rumbles. The LCL ripples, slowly bringing her back to consciousness. She feels numb, broken. She cannot feel her leg, save

for the occasional pain shooting through it, through her entire body. Droplets of blood mix freely with the LCL, mind and body drifting between wake and darkness.

"*...suka, can you hear me?"*

Her mother's voice, shaking. Something has happened, Asuka realizes. Something happened to Uri. Something roaring beyond the entry plug, beyond Zwei, breaking the world around them.

"*The Angel is dead,"* her mother says, "*But we have to stop Unit 01. I'm engaging the Beast Mode remotely."*

A pulse from the core. Asuka snaps her eyes open at the sudden pain.

"**NO."**

"*Zwei?"* Mother's voice, again, "*Zwei, engage Beast Mode!"*

"**NO."**

A sudden jolt. The Entry Plug shakes, jerking back and forth, her belt the only thing keeping her from falling out of the seat as the Plug rolls across the desert ground and the light leaves Zwei's eyes.

It comes to a stop next to Zwei's hand, resting against his fingers as Asuka rolls her head back, staring at the opaque metal walls. Her plugsuit is already pumping her full of sedatives and pain killers. So it is only dimly, slowly, that she turns her swimming head towards the side of the plug as the LCL drains out.

The hatch turns, the manual release engaged, and Asuka blinks as the emergency lights come on and the main egress to the plug opens.

She closes her eyes, resting her head against the padded seat as the clanging of booted feet against the metal of the plug rings out, the belt released as she drifts off to unconsciousness as the figure picks her up, cradling her as he rests her on the floor.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he sits down next to her before tapping the communications button on the black and green plug suit, relieved to find it still has power.

"Mother," Uri says, "I'm reporting in. I'm fine."

He blinks his solid red eyes.

"Just fine."

...

Grappling, Unit-01 grips Go-kun's drill, glowing red eyes leveled on the quadruped's visor, feet slamming into the ground as the conflagration in the distance dies down, the last of the JA series falling. The Beast still bellows, forcing the Eva back as the Core at its chest glows.

Up until a hammer smashes the Beast in the face. Missing its left arm, its armor scored and torn, Jet Alone Prime brings back the hammer as the Arc Reactor flickers, a primal scream from Mana coming from the speakers as the hammer smashes once again into the Beast's face.

The weapon ports on Go-kun's shoulders open up, painting the Beast with plasma as Misato grimly aims the arm cannon, firing upon Unit-01 as JAP replies with its own firepower, hammering the Beast back as it roars and squeals, and finally throws out its arms.

The wall of force sends both back, the Beast roaring. It lunges forward, ripping the hammer from Jet Alone's hands, slamming its fist through the robot's mid section as he claws at the armor...and then stopping. The light in its eyes goes from red to white. Grabbing at its chest, it collapses to its knees, then to all fours, shrieking as the plate on the back of its neck ejects, the light leaving its eyes as it collapses completely.

And with a groan, the Beast falls silent, and Unit-01's Entry Plug drops onto the desert floor.

...

"Internal sensors restored," Kei says, taking the technicians place at the console, half looking at the telemetry and half looking at the screen itself, "Unit-01 confirmed to have an S2 organ."

Yui nods. Kyoko and Pieter have already left the bridge, dealing with what has just occurred. Sighing, folding her arms, she turns from her daughter to the others, clearing her throat.

"Full evacuation," she says, "Misato! Grab Unit-01 and Unit-02. We

need to get them out of American territories as soon as we can. Kirishima?"

"*Reporting in, Ma'am."*

"Status."

"*Prime's totaled. But so's Spencer's army, so I'm calling this a draw."*

"Good to hear," Yui says, allowing herself a small smile, "We'll meet you at the surface. We're getting out of here."

...

The entry plug is opened in Go-kun's hand, Misato wringing the LCL out of her jacket as she and Katsuhito walk towards the prone form of Unit-01, the only sound its echoing, laborous breathing. She reaches out a hand towards it, touching the warm metal of the snouth...and there is movement. A flinching, a small flash of blue in the eyes.

"My God," Katsuhito whispers, "What have we done?"

"We made them fight a war," she responds, "That's what we did. Let's get him out of there."

"There is a chance he's berserk. As dangerous as the Evangelion."

"Shinji's the gentlest kid I know," she responds, glaring at the old man, "*I* am more of a danger to you than he is."

"Of that I have no doubt."

A roar of spinning turbines and Mana descends from the still form of Jet Alone, the opaque black helmet of her new SUIT opening as she touches down. A door opens nearby, a metal plate revealed and retracting as Yui steps out, followed by the Sohryus and the others.

"Okay," Mana says, walking over to Unit-01's prone entry plug, "Everyone, stand back!"

Grabbing the manual release, she pulls it, forming the V shape and twisting. LCL floods the desert sand underneath her, spraying jets as it drains and the egress hatch opens. Running as the last of it drains out, Yui shoves Mana aside, peering in as the emergency lighting illuminates it...and she stops. Her jaw drops open as the tears begin

running down her cheeks, the others peering in and recoiling in shock.

"Oh...oh *God*..."

Turning from the plug, she clenches her eyes shut, Rei rushing over and catching her as Yui collapses.

...

Jet Alone's chest plate opens, the blue core released and falling into Go-kun's hand as the metal giant goes silent for the final time, collapsing under its own weight with a heavy, grinding groan. Watching it, Mana winces, turning back to the others as the heavy roar of the air carrier sends sand flying around them, the confiscating transport they took from NHIS headquarters opening up as Go-kun hefts in the other two Evangelions.

"Kirishima."

She turns. Pieter walks over, both snapping out a quick salute.

"What happened?" he asks.

"I'll file it in the report," she says, "Long story short, Spencer went nutbars. He's not going to be a problem anymore. JAP's totaled, especially from Unit-01, but we've got the AI."

He nods.

"We're leaving?" she asks.

He nods again.

"We called in favors with Washington and sent over our data pertaining," he responds, "But we have to evacuate. Set JA to self destruct and get on the ship."

She nods. Turning from the carrier, she gives the giant one last look, before pointing her gauntlet at it and clicking the button on the underside. The MAGI purged her of all of NHIS's command codes, but not JAP. Prime was compromised, and while they saved the AI, the rest would be a booby trap for whatever Spencer had in mind for some sort of revenge.

Small explosions ripple over the wreckage as she turns and walks

away, biting back the tears as the N2 reactor eats itself, reducing Jet Alone to a mount of scrap as she walks up the ramp.

...

She was running before the words left Hikari's mouth, pushing past the other NERV staff and past Kyoko, running into the infirmary on the carrier and stopping, seeing him sitting by Asuka's beside.

"Uri!"

Uriel turns, eyes going wide and standing up as Annette charges, grabbing onto him as he wraps his arms around her, closing his eyes in their embrace. Slowly, softly, they breathe in and out, silent in their reunion, his plugsuit still sticky with LCL and the tears still evident on her cheeks.

"I'm alright," he says, blinking red eyes, pressing his forehead to hers, "I'm fine. I wasn't hurt."

"It crushed your entry plug," Kyoko says, entering the infirmary, leaning against the doorway, "I'm curious *how.*"

Glancing at his mother, glancing at Annette as she hesitantly takes a step back, he shakes his head.

"I can explain later," he says, "We don't know what listening devices are onboard. It's good to see you, Mother."

Sighing, Kyoko walks over, pulling Uri into a hug. Kissing him on the forehead, she clenches her eyes shut, biting her lip to keep her from crying.

"Don't you ever scare me like that again," she whispers, "I thought I lost *both* of you, today."

...

Little Mommy is recovering in one of the crew cabins. Kei saw it to, saw what was inside the plug. She is still trying to...cope...with what she saw, for lack of a better term. But Eva has its price.

And she is the Sixth Child. But now she wonders if that is a good

thing, seeing the toll Unit-01 has exacted on her brother. Arms folded, staring out the window over the Pacific, she hears the chime of her phone and looks at the number. For the first time in hours, she smiles.

"Nagisa," she says.

"*Kei. It is good to hear you. Are you hurt?"*

"I was in NERV when the attack occurred. Where are you?"

A hesitation.

"*I was helping evacuate. We saved many people. Many people died, though."*

She nods. She knows he cannot see her, wherever he is, but she nods, silently agreeing. The death toll was over two thousand people, all civilians. For too long, she believed he was among them, but that rationale side of her, which she has drawn on less and less these days, told her that he could not die so easily. Not when NERV would be forced to kill him, some day.

"Where are you?"

"*I am in Berlin. I know who was responsible for this, Kei. I cannot let this stand. Not anymore. Goodbye."*

...

He lands. Not via plane or craft, he lands feet first in front of the manor house he knows so well at the Makinami estate, hands clenching and unclenching into fists as he advances upon the mansion. The doors open for him automatically, not through mechanisms but powered by his own anger.

Kaworu Nagisa has come home. It is not a warm homecoming at all. Not today, not from what he has seen.

"Where *IS HE?"*

A woman in a nurse's uniform stops upon seeing him. One of the many attendants towards his master, his father, she knows Nagisa and has never known him to be angry.

"Mr. Nagisa," she says, bowing, "You're here. Good. Come with me."

She takes him by the wrist and leads him onward.

...

Yui has already recovered, sitting in a chair looking out the window. The door opens, and her father enters, knocking on the wall to get her attention.

"When we arrive in Tokyo, I will be taking a flight to my labs in Geneva," he says, "We will deal with things from there."

"Such as killing Kihl," she says.

He nods.

"Not wise to say such things on a craft so monitored," he says, "But, yes. Among other things, I doubt Lorenz Kihl will survive the week. We have induced a limited Beast Mode in Unit-02 in the hangar and it has begun regenerating. As for Unit-01..."

"Don't touch Unit-01."

He nods, arms folded, before walking over and turning Yui's seat around to face him.

"I had no idea what Kihl was having me put in Unit-03," he says, "I swear on your *mother's soul-"*

"Don't," she growls, standing up, "Don't bring her into this. Mom never had anything to do with this and I won't have you using her as a justification for you being *careless.* You endangered the lives of your *grandchildren* and *me* because you actually were stupid enough to *trust* him!"

"For all his mania and vendettas Lorenz has recognized that we are *useless* without you heading Project E," he snaps back, "If he has actually made an attempt on your life and the entire pilot pool, than he is unfit to lead the Council. Call a meeting in two days. We will deal with this, officially, then."

They go silent. Neither makes a move towards the other, neither meeting the other's gaze.

"And NERV gets hung out to dry," she says.

"No," he responds, "Spencer will serve as the scapegoat. Some blame will fall on the New Vegas branch, but the identity of the pilots is public knowledge. I would tighten Section 2 coverage on them, though."

She nods. He reaches out, placing his hand on her shoulder, his face expressionless as always.

"Yui, I almost lost you, today," he says, "You and your children. Now's not the time for vendettas. I'm sorry."

Squeezing her shoulder, her allows a small, tight smile, and turns to walk out, closing the door behind him.

...

Kaworu stares at the sight as the nurse leads him in, the doctors and attendants at the bed bowing in respect to Nagisa as he is brought in. The bed is surrounded, the four post bed lined with machines and instruments showing vitals, brain activity, pulse and breathing.

"What happened?" he asks, softly.

"Mr. Kihl had a stroke," the nurse explains, "It was...severe. He has been in and out of consciousness, but...the machines are keeping him alive, Mr. Nagisa. He has lost nearly all muscle control. He cannot leave the bed, much less the room."

Kaworu says nothing, staring at the bedridden image of his father. Even the visor is gone, the tired, old face resting with its eyes closed, the mask and tube over his wrinkled old mouth forcing the air into his lungs.

"Leave us," Kaworu says. Not questioning, wise enough not to, they leave, filing out of the room, whispering muted condolences.

A hiss, and groan, the sound of the air compressor keeping him breathing, as Kaworu takes the chair and pulls it over, sitting at the man's bedside. Kihl's fingers twitch, tapping on the keypad under his right hand.

"*Tabris. You are alive. Good.*"

A digitization of his voice, Kaworu grinding his teeth at the sound.

"I came here to *kill* you, you know," he says, "For what you did."

"*You would have survived. The Cherubim was less than you."*

Kaworu's eyes flash bright red, his fingers grinding into the armrests of the chair, splintering wood.

"That doesn't matter," he hisses, "She could have been killed. People *died* for what you did. And you feel nothing."

A small, choking sound from the air mask. The wrinkled lips curl upwards.

"*Price to pay for what we do. They will live again, in perfection.*"

Staring at the old man, Kaworu considers it. He considers grabbing him by the throat and squeezing, considers ending this man, right here. Softly, silently, he reaches out...and stops. He stands, turning.

"*Tabris.*"

"I want to kill you," he says, "Every fiber in my being wants to kill you. But that would be *mercy*. You do not deserve *mercy*. So I am going to punish you, Kihl. You are going to stay there. Dead in body but not in mind, for as long as I see fit. The man who is afraid of death is not going to die. Not until I'm done with you."

Turning, he walks out, slamming the door behind him.

...

In Tokyo-3, Maya Ibuki nods, listening to the audio feed from the NHIS carrier. Everyone they sent over is coming back, she realizes with a long pent up breath. It's over. The crisis in New Vegas is over and done with and everyone is coming home. Sighing, not realizing that no one in the debriefing room is showing similar signs of relief, she turns to Ritsuko, who is studying the data from Unit-01 with a pensive look on her face.

And the Commander has no expression whatsoever. She knows he is relieved, but then there was the report on Unit-01's entry plug, send only to his PDA. And the look of dawning horror on his face as he reads it.

"Akagi," he says, "Meet the carrier when it lands. Unload Unit-01's entry plug and set up a full containment. Unit-01 is to be put on full freeze, no independent movement unless authorized by me or Dr. Ikari."

Akagi nods. Gendo opens his mouth to dismiss them, when the door opens and Mari stumbles in, face bone white, blood dripping from her nose.

"Mari?" Maya asks.

"We need to go to full alert," Mari chokes, "We have a *problem.*"

...

Deep in Sheol, Junior raises his head. His eyes, vertical, open wide.

No. Not now. Not this soon.

Next to him, Lilly shakes, trilling in barely contained horror at what she, too, senses.

Around the world, the incomplete beasts of the Eva series raise their heads and moan. Unit-02's head tilts up in the hangar, green briefly flickering across its eyes before it shuts back down.

And in Berlin, Kaworu wanders to the outside of the manor, walking in the garden as his mind roils, his thoughts churn, and he grips a side of the gazebo he would sit at with enough force to splinter the railings.

And then he looks up and he is facing a mountain on the blasted plain.

And the mountain speaks with Thunder.

"You were given your chances," it booms.

"I chose to save lives."

"You chose to save the lives of Lilim against destroying the Abomination. You have chosen to betray your kin rather than fulfill your role. You have chosen to pursue your own agenda rather than ours. And more of us die while you play at your games."

Kaworu shields his eyes. The glow comes from it, deep within the

recesses of the metal grimace.

"All I need is more time-"

"***You have FAILED. We will find another way."***

The mountain unravels. The black tendrils reach to the sky as the plain shakes and the horror creeps across Kaworu's face.

"***I am now assuming Direct Control.***"

...

And across the surface of the moon, across the Sea of Tranquility, an angry red line cuts through the gray rock and dust, blasting debris past orbit. Should one look up at it from Earth, one would see the red dot, spreading out into a blood hued halo as rock is sent Earthwards.

Through license of he who is called "I Am" I am coming.

Within the newly made crater, the sole inhabitant wakes. Red light glows in the black recesses of the metal skull.

Though my feet shall tread upon the Base Earth upon my quest, I am coming.

It rises. Black tendrils unbind from the body, spreading like black wings in the blood hued rock.

I am the Second to the Father. Inheritor of his boundless rage.

It begins to rise. In NERV-Luna the tremor hits knocking all the workers off their feet, knocking the moon a single degree off its axis.

Your existence has come at my pleasure and patience. And that, like your works of civilization,

Shall now come to an end.

It rises. A flowing mass of black tendrils capped by the mound upon the shoulders, crowned by the silver skull shaped grimace, like a Black Angel of Death descending towards Earth.

I am the Greatest of the Messengers.

Mountain of their strength.

A silent roar. Upon the Earth itself, creatures who cannot hear look upwards at the sound. Some keel over then and there.

Mountains shall crumble in my passing.

Songs shall be sung of what is left in my wake.

It passes the moon. Satellites short out upon witnessing it, the very presence locking up their surveillance software.

I am the Arm of God.

Angel of Might.

The first pieces of debris burn, entering the atmosphere of Earth as the Angel follows.

I am Zeruel.

And the fire embraces him as he too begins his descent to Earth.

I have come.

Chapter 66: The Curious Case of Shinji Ikari

MAGI ACCESS GRANTED: RECOGNIZED: Sys/Admin BALTHAZAR

Accessing: Infirmary Camera 19

The image blurs in. The isolation ward of the NERV infirmary in Tokyo-3, white sheets, white floors, and a familiar ceiling, scanned over by the camera he now controls. The room is fully sealed, plastic walls with full windows allowing them a view inside, as the door to it unseals and opens and Yui Ikari enters.

The sole inhabitant of the room stirs, shifting to her side, still sleeping as Yui walks over, picking up a chair and setting it down softly by the bedside. She sits, reaching out, pushing the bang of dark chocolate brown hair off the forehead of the six year old girl, a tight and guilty smile on her face.

The girl senses it. She stirs, opening crystal blue eyes. Her face splits into a wide smile, sitting up, gazing upon Yui as tears stream down the scientists' cheeks.

"Mommy?"

Ichi tries to stand, tries to leap out into her mother's arms, but finds she cannot, as Yui strokes her hair, turning her and cupping her hands on her face.

"Ichi," she says, "This is *real*. This isn't the virtual interface or the MAGI. This is the real world. Do you remember what happened?"

The girl blinks, mouthing what Yui said. She recoils, looking around, feeling the sheets in her hands, feeling her own face.

"I...I was hurt," Ichi says, "I was falling. Shinji caught me. He wouldn't let me go."

She turns back to Yui.

"Where's Shinji?"

Yui lowers her head, balling her fists.

"Shinji took your place, Ichi," she says, "He's inside Unit 01. I don't know if we can get him out."

The image dissolves to static. Curled up in a ball in his own personal Hell, Shinji Ikari, child of the director of Project E and the Commander of NERV, brother to eight demigoddess sisters, lover of the smartest girl he's ever known, lets out a relieved breath. He can stay here. Everything else is good.

"Ikari."

But now there is someone else. Rei is here with him, except it isn't Rei. It is Rei, younger, a couple of years younger, in an outdated school uniform, the green and white one. Her hands are hanging at her side and she is staring at him, devoid of emotion and joy, so unlike his sister.

She levels her red eyes at him, staring at him for a long, long moment. Silently, slowly, she reaches out, placing her hand on the side of his face.

And then she is gone when he blinks.

Chapter 66: The Curious Case of Shinji Ikari

The camera flickers in to Cage 2. Sitting in a wheelchair, the cast over her leg and bruises covering her arms and face, Asuka stares at the silent, mostly restored Zwei. If one looked closely, one could see the flickering movement underneath the green orbs that serve as Unit-02's optic covering. Zwei is, after all, looking back upon his Master.

"Mother said I'd find you here."

She turns. Smiling, she eases herself onto the railing, taking the crutches and hobbling over towards Uri as he turns and stares at Unit-02, a wistful smile on his face. Turning back to Asuka, he clasps her on the shoulder, nodding.

"How are you?" he asks.

"S-sore," she says, meeting his gaze with a shaky smile, "B-but I'll l-live. How about you?"

"Confused, but fine," he says, and turns back to Zwei, "Any word on Ikari?"

"No. Are you a-angry?"

"With him? No. Other people I should be angry with, Asuka," he responds, and sighs, "Of course, problem is that I can't really do anything about it, right now. Even if an Angel attacks, I'm just...here."

He sighs, gripping the railing.

"I believed Unit-03 would be my chance," he says, "Allow me to get back into the thick of things. Now that it's gone, and it was a trap to begin with...I don't know."

Asuka smiles, placing her hand on his.

"G-good," she says, "That's wh-why I wanted you to come down here. Zwei?"

The four green eyes light up.

"**MASTER?**"

"Zwei, why didn't you ever work for Uri?" she asks.

The Evangelion tilts its head, turning its gaze to the dumbstruck Uri.

"**SMELLS WEIRD.**"

Asuka smiles back, leaning on her crutches, turning from Zwei to the astonished Uri as he glances between them.

"He can talk?"

"I l-listened," she responds, "They're living b-beings, Uri. N-not tools. If you open your heart to them, they'll accept you."

Turning back to Zwei, she smiles. She came up with this idea on the way back, talked it over with Mother. As much as she might miss the thrill, this helps more people than she could have otherwise.

"Zwei, I want you to give Uri another chance," she says, "I'll still be here, Zwei. I'll still be helping you. But I want you to let Uri pilot you again. He'll open his heart to you like I did, but that means you have to try to accept him. Okay?"

Zwei nods. It is a simple gesture from the giant machine. In response, Uri almost collapses against the catwalk as the green glow fades.

"Y...you're giving me back Unit-02?" he asks.

"He likes to be called Zwei," she says with a smile, placing her hand on his shoulder, "Uri, you've trained to pilot your entire life. I just fell into the cockpit and that Angel almost k-killed me."

"Don't sell yourself short," he responds, the smile creeping across his face, "I've seen the tapes. I've seen the videos. You're *magnificent."*

She nods. Biting her lip, a tight smile on her face.

"I c-can do more here," she says, "In Project E. There's s-so much we d-don't know, and I n-need to find out. And Eva is your life, Uri. You've h-helped me, now I c-can help you."

He grabs her shoulders, pulling her off her crutches and into a hug. The image flickers, and fades to static as the camera switches back to automatic control.

...

He watches Ichi smiling to the staff cycling in and out of the infirmary room. He watches them fit her for her wheelchair, helping her stand on her own-on real legs-for the first time. This is *good,* Shinji thinks. This is *right.* He can let this be. He can let this stand.

He's done enough.

He's guilty of enough.

He knows the death toll. He knows the carnage. Maybe now, he doesn't have to face it. Maybe this can be his punishment, his penance.

And then he looks through another camera. He sees Asuka sitting by one of the infirmary beds, her face in her hands. He hears her high pitched, choked sob. Hears her crying. Hears her begging him to come back.

And then he turns away, killing the connection.

"Ikari."

And comes face to face with the Rei again, the fourteen year old girl who looks like Rei but is not Rei.

And then he blinks, and she is gone.

Kei peaks into the infirmary room, then closes the door, silently, leaving the infirmary as her thoughts wander. Another message from Nagisa. He says he misses her. He says things are proceeding apace. He cannot say much of what has happened, only that he has taken appropriate measures for what has happened.

She doesn't want to think about what that means. She doesn't want to think that he killed the Chairman. Not that Kihl does not deserve to die, but she does not want to believe that Kaworu is so capable of murdering him.

Pausing, she looks up from her thoughts. Mari is talking to Annette in the crossways of the corridor. Both have recovered well, Annette from her trials in New Vegas and Mari from the shock of realizing an Angel, the most powerful of the Angels, is coming.

Which is odd. She believed Mari, who had been visibly pining for Uriel, would be upset or starting a rivalry with Annette, who seems to have won her affections. Annette leaves, waving, and Kei walks forward, Mari smiling.

"Hey," she says, punching Kei in the arm, "Been a while. How've you been?"

"Fine," Kei responds, narrowing her eyes, "I am confused. Aren't you jealous of Ms. Ikari?"

Mari raises her eyebrows, and removing her glasses, she laughs while rubbing her eyes.

"Yeah, a bit," she says, "No reason I have to get into a catfight with her, though. I mean, Mana and I get along well enough, don't we?"

"I see."

"Besides which, winner's the one that breaks Uri in, after all," Mari says with a snicker and a smirk, smacking Kei on the shoulder, "Winner takes all."

She smiles, sipping her canned coffee. Kei raises an eyebrow and smiles back.

"Who won with you?"

Which prompts Mari to start choking on her coffee, pounding her chest while glaring at Kei, who smiles and walks off. Neither of them see Lilly hovering near the ceiling, the tentacle eye staring through it before retracting.

...

The camera shifts again. Mom is helping Ichi walk. Her time in the Vrs let her know how the motions work, but she still needs to get the muscles to work. In reality, she's twelve years old, but physically six, and the transition is jarring. But she is smart. She's an Ikari. She learns fast enough.

Ichi smiles, the bright, cheerful smile of a child, holding Mom's hand as she puts one foot in front of the other, just like their time in that trippy, weird world during the Leilel attack

And sees Ichi crying, screaming, backing away with her hands in front of her

And he stops. That isn't right, Shinji thinks. He pulled her out of the Core. Gave what was his body to her. She's real now, and he's in the Core. Just like it should be.

He switches to another camera, to Dr. Akagi and Dr. Sohryu.

...

"Any luck with the Avatars?" Ritsuko asks, tapping her cigarette on the ashtray as she stares at the mounted, glowing blue AI Core of the former Jet Alone Prime.

Kyoko shakes her head, sitting in Akagi's chair in her lab as she fiddles with the robotic, human sized head, swearing in german as a spark singes her fingers.

"Unit-01's core is still unresponsive," she says, "We've tried everything, but no transmission. Ikari insists it will take time, but if we do have an Angel heading this way, we may have to resort to drastic measures."

"You mean Asuka."

Kyoko nods, holding up the head, in proportion for a short, teenage

human girl.

"Unit-01's intelligence likes her," she says, softly, wincing at the words and how clinical it sounds, "Asuka may be able to reach it. The long and short of it is, we need Unit-01. Even if we can't entirely trust it."

Ritsuko nods, tapping at the keyboards arranged in front of her as the AI core hums in response.

"Has Ikari made a decision regarding Jet Alone?" Kyoko asks.

"Kaji is tracking down Tokita," Ritsuko responds, "He's going to make an offer to purchase Mana and the Jet Alone core from NHIS. Considering what happened with Spencer, we think Tokita will be amenable."

"And Mana?"

"She's still writing up her report. Give her a few days. Then she can tell us what happened in Vegas."

Akagi nods, turning back to the console as the Core sparks, the eyes of the robotic skull lighting up.

"Ah," Kyoko says with a tight smile, "Good morning, Jet Alone. How are you, today?"

...

The spotlight opens, illuminating only Yui Ikari in the room as she stares, her jaw set, her eyes red. The eleven monoliths of SEELE glow, save for one. 05 is unlabeled and dark, meaning the grizzly task set forth to her old friend has been completed.

And 01 is still lit.

"This meeting is called to order," 06 says, "There are charges to be labeled and filed against SEELE 01. We have evidence that the disaster in New Vegas was the result of the actions of 01 and 05, including 05 activating the Jet Alone program without prior authorization to purge New Vegas. It was the actions of Captain Kirishima which prevented the complete destruction of New Vegas from escalating into a massacre with a death toll of 300,000."

"Does SEELE 01 have anything to say in his defense?" Yui asks,

keeping her voice level. Keeping herself from screaming.

"Yes."

And SEELE 01 speaks with a voice that is not Lorenz Kihl's. The monolith fades, and in its place stands Kaworu Nagisa.

"Lorenz Kihl is no longer of this world," he says, "As he ward and his sole heir, I claim the title of SEELE 01, but not the role of Chairman of the Council."

He gestures. SEELE 06 disappears, replaced by her father, bristling as his avatar being so summarily dismissed.

"I nominate Professor Katsuhito Ikari to take the role of Chairman," Kaworu says, folding his hands behind him, "Effective immediately. I cast my support behind him. His actions allowed NERV to respond to the threat of the Cherubim and to the threat from the Jet Alone project. He has already proved to be a more stable guiding hand than Chairman Kihl."

The other voices quickly chime in agreement. Kaworu smiles, nodding to Yui as the others fade out.

"Is this to your agreement?" Kaworu asks.

Yui nods, with visible hesitation.

"I am sorry for what has happened," he continues, "Please, pass my condolences onto the others. And to your daughter."

"I will," Yui says, "Is Kihl dead?"

Kaworu nods, hesitation visible. It was well known he was raised by the man, seeing him as an ally if not a father, and his image fades away. And the door opens behind her, and Yui exits. Business done.

...

He floats, and drifts. Over the days, his views shift, taking over other cameras. He sees Asuka sitting by the bedside, crying, and his heart aches. But he can't go to her. Not like this.

He sees Ichi smiling and playing. He never sees the Ree go to her, though. He's sure they would be overjoyed by their little sister coming

into the real world, though. Wouldn't they? Why are the girls keeping away from her?

GET AWAY!

And he remembers the crying, her pushing him away. He remembers roaring, blood. He remembers the taste of Raziel as he bit into it. He remembers...something...stirring deep within him. Something horrible. Something old and familiar.

STOP IT!

He winces. Grabs his head. Looks up, and stares into red eyes again.

"Ikari."

He blinks, and he is alone once again.

...

Leaning against the railing, Misato stares at the still form of Unit-01. Normally, one would be able to see the faint yellow glow. The sign that, in the good old days, Ichi was awake and watching you, curious.

They've tried everything. Music. Singing. Even tried dusting off the party hat, suggesting loudly in front of her that maybe they need to throw Unit-01 another birthday party over how well it was on the way back from New Vegas.

But nothing. If not for the fact that they could still read the data flowing through Unit-01's solenoid core, they would believe that Unit-01 was dead.

Swearing to herself, she bites her lip as Kaji places his hand on hers, pulling her into a soft, slow hug.

"You're beating yourself up over it, Katsuragi," he says, resting her head on his shoulder, "It isn't your fault."

"I can't help it," she says, sighing, "I just want him back."

"He'll be back when he's back. You know that. The kid's got a lot of people waiting for him."

Adam Mondschein paces, the project E waiting room he and Allison have been stuck in sterile white, the reports about the rocks falling all over the western hemisphere filling the news feeds on the wall mounted television. Yui took a blood sample from them both two hours ago and disappeared into her lab, telling them to wait.

"Adam," Allison says, "This is important."

"How?" he asks.

"She wants to get what's in Unit-01's core out of it," she says, "Like Dr. Mondschein did with me. It's important to her. She needs to find a way to make this work."

He stops, staring at her.

"Why?" he asks, "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"I don't think Unit-01's like the other Evas, Adam," she says, "I've been looking through the MAGI with Asuka's help. I think there's something a lot of us are missing about Unit-01."

The door to the waiting room opens. Yui walks out, shaking her head.

"Thank you for your patience," she says, "Unfortunately, I still can't find anything about how Dr. Mondschein managed the procedure. You're sure he didn't leave any notes?"

They both nod.

"I was the AI, but he didn't give me a full link to his computer," she says, "I think he was afraid SEELE would get the data."

Yui nods, sighing. Which is when the alarms start blaring, the three of them looking up.

"Something's happening," she says, "Dogma! Report!"

"*Angel has been sited! It's made landfall in western China and is advancing towards Beijing! Blue pattern confirmed!"*

Yui swears, walking out, the other two following.

"We're going to have you in the Geofront shelters," she says, "If the

angel is anything like Mari said, we need to evacuate the above ground Tokyo-3. Adam, I may have to ask you to help with piloting, if possible."

He nods. Which is when the speakers blare again, Maya's panicked voice coming over them.

"*Blue patterns detected! MAGI confirms four blue patterns moving to intercept the Angel!"*

...

He cut the cameras. He wallowed in darkness. Curling up into a ball in the darkness, he blocks out everything. Blocks out the memories, blocks out Ichi screaming at him as he grabbed her hand and she pulled away. Everything is *wrong,* everything isn't like it should be. What isn't he seeing? He asks himself. What is so wrong with this world? What doesn't he see?

"Ikari."

The girl, again. The girl stares at him, with dead red eyes, pale as a ghost, illuminating the darkness.

"Is it time?" she asks.

"Time?" he asks.

She is gone when he blinks. He rests in the darkness. He pieces his mind together. He remembers some of it. Some disjointed memories come to him. He remembers rage, the cry of Ichi. He remembers feeling angrier than he ever did.

He remembers hate.

Blood.

Hunger.

He remembers descending into the Core, determined to rescue her. He remembers grabbing her hand to pull him out, damning the world if he had to if it meant saving her, one act of defiance to save the life of the innocent.

But what happened after that? Didn't he pull her into the plug and take her place

"Ichi! I've got you!"

His hand grabs hers. He smiles, seeing her, her tears dry on her cheeks, the power of the newly consumed S2 organ repairing the damage to Unit-01 and restoring the Core to its former self, the girl seeing him...

And screaming.

"Don't come any closer!" she screams, pulling away from him, his smile disappearing when he sees the twisting, pure terror on her face, "STOP IT!"

"Ichi, the Angel's gone! I've got you! I can get you out of here!"

She claws at his hand. He pulls back, his eyes going wide as she pulls out of his grasp.

"GET AWAY!" she screams, "GET AWAY!"

His blood flecked face reflected in her eyes, the girl screaming in terror when she sees what he has done, what depths his anger can bring him to. And she dives into the depths of the Core, as he tries to reach her-

And the alarms blare. He takes over a camera quickly, one on the surface just as the blast of light vaporizes it. A quick check of the date. He was out for two days. A week total since New Vegas. Another camera on the Geofront roof, watching as Tokyo-3 itself collapses through the Geofront, buildings crashing into the lake, one slamming into the pyramid itself. Just before the camera goes out, he sees the black tendrils descending. Hears Maya screaming about the blue pattern.

The Angel is here.

Another camera shot. He watches as the Angel, the black mass of tendrils and skull face, descends into the Geofront. First comes Go-kun, charging with Rei at its helm, leaping through the AT Field to break the Core.

A burst of static. Another angle. Go-kun falls, arms cut off by the blades before the Angel vaporizes the top half of it with a blast from its eyes, another blast vaporizing the outer armor of NERV-1 and descending into it.

Mom is screaming. Rei, gone, the data says.

Shinji tries to move. Tries to will Unit-01 to life. Tries to do something, but cannot. No pilot, and the Eva cannot move. He can't move the Eva on its out.

IKARI.

The voice, booming like thunder, like from the encounter with the mountain in the Dirac. Power, force, anger.

Another blast. Central Dogma is gone. Misato, Mom, Dad. Everyone. The Angel continues, advancing deeper, pausing at Cage 2 to blast Zwei's core, gutting the red Eva like a cow carcass before going deeper, stopping as it reaches Cage 3. Reaches him.

IKARI.

Which is when Shinji realizes he can hear its voice. The metal skull grimace, staring at him. Staring into the dead eyes of Unit-01, the expressionless skull mask nonetheless conveying the hate, the power, the rage.

Asuka screams, already in her plug suit, on the catwalk and freezing in mid step to Unit-01's entry plug. The Angel turns, and its eyes glow. Nothing remains, only the blackened slag that was the catwalk and the wall, before turning back to Shinji.

THIS WAR ENDS NOW.

And the eyes glow again

...

And Shinji's eyes open. He is in the darkness. The girl, Rei, is in front of him, staring at him with glowing red eyes.

"Is it time?" she asks.

He stares at her.

"Am I dead?" he asks.

"No," she says, "You are dreaming."

He blinks. He remembers, faintly. Trying to dive into the Core, but Ichi pushed him back. Pushed him away. Pushed him all the way back to the Entry Plug before forcing it out and sealing herself off.

"I'm not in the core," he says.

"Yes. You are sleeping. You have been sleeping for six days, twelve hours, and thirty nine minutes," she responds, "We have met before."

He stares at her. The red eyes. Knowledge beyond them, and then there is the familiarity.

"Lilith," he says.

She nods. A small smile comes to her face, demure on her features.

"It is not time," she says, "*Wake.*"

...

A gasp, and he opens his eyes. He blinks, the light from the familiar ceiling stabbing his eyes, grunting a curse as he clenches his eyes shut, turning his head to the side. In her chair, Asuka stirs, turning, blinking before her eyes open wide.

"Shinji!" she screams, "*REI! He's awake!*"

A tapping in the air duct above and someone yelling in the background, before Asuka is out of her chair, limping on her cast bound leg and grabbing him by the head, kissing him. He moves to move his hand, to wrap his arms around her, but finds he cannot. He can feel his arms, feel his legs, but when he tries to move them they feel bolted down.

"Asuka!"

She pulls away, turning as Misato and Mom enter, Shinji's heart skipping a beat when he sees them both, feeling the relieved tears moving down the sides of his head and hitting the pillow.

Misato is first, kissing him on the forehead and ruffling his hair. And then Shinji's cheeks sting as she slaps him, Asuka gasping and Yui glaring at her.

"Are you *fucking insane?"* Misato yells, face red and eyes bloodshot, "I owe you for that, mister, for making us worry about you a second time!"

"Sorry," he croaks, "Why am I tied down?"

"Because you were feral when we pulled you out of the Entry Plug," Yui explains, arms folded, face grim, "Shinji...there's no easy way to explain this. What do you remember?"

He blinks. His throat should be dry, if this has been six days. But it isn't.

"I remember reaching into the Core. I thought I switched places with Ichi...but I didn't, did I?"

Yui shakes her head.

"Ichi's locked off the Core entirely," she says, "We think she was scared of what happened. We think that might be why what happened...happened. Shinji, something went wrong when Unit-01 pushed you back out."

Asuka has already begun loosening the straps around his wrists and waist, releasing the one around his neck.

"Mom," he says, "Mom, define 'wrong.'"

Misato nods to Yui, pulling out the full standing mirror from behind the infirmary curtains. Sitting up, Shinji reaches up to rub his eyes, groaning from muscles that don't feel as sore as they should...

And pulls his hand away. He stares at it, turning it around. Pale. Pale white.

He stands up, shakily, Asuka already at his side to help him stand as he stares into the mirror and finds himself staring back. Except...except...

Except that what stares back at him looks like him, has the same shape and stance and height and everything like he should.

Save for his skin, the color of marble and alabaster, like he has never seen the sun a day in his life.

And the hair, a bright aqua blue.

And his eyes, red as blood.

"Shinji," Yui explains, "When you were inside Unit-01's core, we think that the damage Raziel caused to you due to your high synchronization was...severe."

She pauses, as Shinji continues staring.

"So, we think that Unit-01 compensated with its own," she continues, biting her lip, "I've done the tests. The genetic match is identical. You now have Lilithian genetic material in you, Shinji. You're now a Nephilem."

Chapter 67: Standing in the Storm

Camera fades in. Rei and Kei stare into the lens, Rei tapping it before her face splits into a wide, toothy grin and Kei raises an eyebrow. Stepping back, the two identical sisters, both in identical school uniforms, stand at attention in the sterile white room, overlooking a patch of what appears to be marshmallow, in Sheol.

"Heee~ey there," Rei says, "I'm Rei Ayanami."

"And I am Kei Ayanami," Kei responds, "Have you recently found yourself changed?"

"Is your skin whiter?"

"Have your eyes turned red?"

"Do you find you can eat your own weight in food in one sitting?"

"Do you want to navigate closed ductwork and procreate with people via occular intrusion?"

"Can you cut off your hand and watch it grow back really slooooo~oowly?"

"Have you found yourself transformed into the purest form of Lilithian life?"

The two sisters lean in together, arms out in a pose, which on Kei looks remarkably forced.

"Then you've just become a Nephilem!" Rei sing songs, "For those of you who don't know, let's run down what a Nephilem is! Kei?"

Kei clicks a remote. A hologram appears of Sachiel, waving at the camera.

"This is an Angel," she says, "Angels are giant beings who, for the sake of brevity, which to kill us all. As a Nephilem, you are half Angel. You possess many of their abilities, but without necessarily the desire to destroy Mankind."

The hologram changes to an image of Kaworu. More in particular, it changes to an image of a shirtless Kaworu, who is currently sparkling.

"Because Angels and Humans are genetically similar, a human/Angel

hybrid is possible. With an Adamite Nephilem, you can have abilities similar to your parent Angel. For example, a Nephilem hybridized from the Angel Ramiel would be capable of force blasts, or a Nephilem hybridized from Shamsiel would be able to manifest energy whips. As a Lilithian Nephilem, you would be closer in spirit and mentality to the original creator of life on Earth."

Rei grins, ear to ear, with far too many teeth.

"And you'd want to make babies."

*"**BABIES.**"*

Both turn to the marshmallow mass in the window, shrugging.

Something bangs overhead. Kei and Rei step to the side, as the ventilation grate above them opens and, with a scream, Shinji Ikari drops to the floor. Iti peaks her head out, waving at the camera before closing the grate upon her exit.

*"Hi there, Big Brother!" Rei squeals, grabbing Shinji as he groans and pulling him into a hug, "Congratulations on your becoming **Ree!**"*

Head still swimming, he stares at her.

"Buh?"

"As a Lilithian Nephilem, you will be privilege to several abilities," Kei explains, "Depending on the presence of a core or S2 organ, you would be able to create AT fields. You will be stronger, more agile, and be able to regenerate. Your stamina will increase."

The far door caves outward, perfectly showing the impression of a fist. Kei and Rei stare, Rei dropping Shinji as the door falls with a second punch. Standing in the steam and light, a pale, blue haired and red eyed girl in a french maid uniform stands, holding a set of ropes and a ball gag in her hand.

"Heure de seller vers le haut, mon jouet doux. Je vous casserai dedans jusqu'à ce que vous me priiez de te faire ma marionnette de main!"

"Zyuu has learned Shinji can regenerate," Kei says, "It seems the sedatives we have slipped her have worn off."

Eyes wide, Shinji turns and begins stumbling towards the door, Zyuu blowing two billows of steam out of her nose before advancing after him,

breaking through her open, wide grinning mouth.

"Hobble faster, Shinji!" Rei says, "She's gaining!"

Which is when Zyuu is covered in a virtual wall of yellow filled needles from chest to toe, pausing momentarily.

"Hélas ! Ma conquête a été mais a retardé!"

And with those words, Zyuu collapses. Kei and Rei turn to the open door on the other end. Holding the needle filled, hand held gatling gun, Yui Ikari stares at her two daughters, her face inscrutable, but not pleased. And with a nervous laugh, Rei clicks the camera off.

Chapter 67: Standing In the Storm

"Alright, let's get this over with," she sighs, "Report. Mana Kirishima, Captain, JSSDF. Formerly attached to Nippon Heavy Industries Syndicate, headquartered in New Vegas."

She pauses, looks past the camera.

"We can do this later," Kaji says, reaching for the off button, but she shakes her head.

She just got her hair clipped, especially to hide the singes, and she shifts uncomfortably in front of the camera. Usually she isn't camera shy, but the events of the past week and a half have been taking their toll on her. She almost winces when the light comes on. Almost.

"Alright," she says, "Upon arrival at New Vegas, I was carted off, with Inspector Kaji Ryoji, to Las Vegas, where the corporate headquarters of NHIS is located. There, we were met by the chief engineer of Jet Alone Prime's umbrella project. Shiro Tokita."

...

For someone who was both humiliated and forced to drink toilet water the last time they saw him, the ear to ear grin splitting Shiro Tokita's weasel like features is something of a surprise. Even moreso is

the fact that said toothy, jaw dislocating smile is directed at the two of them, who were responsible for the humiliation and urinal dunking.

"Well, look who's here!" he yells, clapping his hands, "If it isn't my two favorite Tokyo-3 travellers!"

Mana and Kaji stare at each other, then turn back to Tokita.

"Good to see there's no hard feelings," Kaji says, "Tokita. Mr. X sent you as the welcoming committee?"

"Damn straight, skippy!" Tokita says with a clap of his hands, several men in black suits appearing around Kaji and Mana, taking their suitcases as a limo drives up behind Tokita, "Mana, Mr. Spencer is pleased as punch with you, got to tell you that. You one-shot killing that Cherubim made the old man's day, and when someone makes *his* day, it makes *everyone's* day."

"I thought he wanted me decommissioned," Mana deadpans, eyebrow twitching.

"That was then, this was now," Tokita says, moving to put an arm around Mana's shoulder, and backing away under Kaji's glare, "That being said, he wants to see us all. He's got big *plans* for you, Mana. *Big* plans."

With that, they are escorted into the car. Loading the luggage into the trunk, one of the bodyguards grunts, motioning over one of the other agents as they life the human-sized trunk.

"How much luggage does that girl need?"

"She's a teenage girl, Paul. Military brat or not, she probably needs clothes."

The two grunt, walking back to their car as the limo speeds off.

...

As she taps her pen on the clipboard, Yui Ikari scrunches her forehead, biting her lip as she walks down the hallway towards the infirmary. Two more hours of trying to reach the Core, two more ours of every attempt failing. Asking Ichi to respond, direct connections to the game program Ichi liked, even telling her they would make her a cake. All

rebuffed. Ichi has locked herself in Unit-01's Core.

Ichi has never done that before. But Ichi has never been that frightened before.

Musing is broken by the wafting of soft music from the infirmary, or more in particular from the room she is heading to. She hasn't heard that in...six years, she thinks, as she slips off her sneakers and slowly walks down the hall to her son's recover room.

Sitting on the bed, bow in one hand, cello neck held in the other, Shinji plays. He would say he was an average cello player, but in reality he is quite good. Always a good learner, always adapting what Tomoe taught him. But then again, he only plays when he's depressed, and she usually made it a point to keep him as upbeat as possible.

He didn't even play when the Horaki girl was hurt. This whole situation with him and with Ichi is hurting him more than he lets show.

She waits. He's playing Chopin, she mentally notes, *Air* most likely, even if she gets her classical musicians confused. Tomoe was always arts and crafts, she was always science. He took after Mom, she took after Dad, even if she was loathe to admit it.

She lets him finish, the final notes wafting. And with a small push, opens the door, stowing her clipboard under her arm as she claps.

"Mom," he says, and drops the bow, as she walks over and eases the cello back into its case, "I didn't know you were listening."

"Not to all of it," she says, pulling up a chair and sitting down, "Just a bit. How are you?"

"Still pooped," he sighs, "I can stand and stumble. But that's it."

She reaches out, touching his forehead with the back of her hand.

"No fever," she says, "And you don't have an S2 organ, so you're probably not going to be bouncing all over the place like your sisters. Katsuragi will thank me."

"That's not very scientific."

"I'm not very scientific when it concerns my son," she says with a smile, "Ichi's still not responding."

He swears, gnashing his teeth.

"It's not your fault," she says, cupping his chin and forcing him to face her, "You did what you had to. If you didn't, Ichi would have *died.* Don't blame yourself for doing the right thing. We'll reach her, but I think she's just scared, right now."

He nods, sighing. The pain is evident on his face. Like it is on hers. She blames herself, to, for not being thorough enough.

"Your father is worried, to," she says, "But he's been busy running NERV. You'll probably go home with Misato in two days. I don't think you need any anti rejection medication or anything like that, but we never had a lilithian Nephilim before."

He nods, sighing again.

"And one more thing," she says, "Did you see anything, when you were in Unit-01's Core?"

He squints. Closes his eyes. Drifts back.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did."

...

The lights flicker on inside the entry plug, and Adam Mondschein sighs, breathing in the LCL. His own plugsuit was destroyed, so they gave him one of Shinji's spares. Thankfully, they're about the same size, so it isn't too tight. Not that it being tight is the biggest worry he has. The biggest worry he has is what will happen during this test.

After all, it's not 'his' Eva.

"*So, how are you doing?"*

He smiles slightly, the image of the girl with long black hair appearing in his right eye.

"Fine, Allison," he says, and sighs, "Why are we doing this, again?"

Another window opens, revealing Dr. Sohryu's face.

"*Ichi is highly social. We think introducing her to someone new will get her out of her isolation. In theory, at least."*

"*Doctor Sohryu, what's the worst case scenario?"*

"Well, worst case scenario is that we'll have a 400% synchronization and Mr. Mondschein will be eaten by the Evangelion, but that's always worst case. In reality, I think the worst that will happen is that Ichi will reject him and he'll have a heaache."

Adam chokes slightly, bubbles floating up in the LCL. That wasn't reassuring.

"*Let's begin*," Maya says, her chipper, cheerful voice direct contrast with Dr. Sohryu, "*Start entry sequence. Pilot, please specify interface language."*

"Um...English."

"Stage One, set. Stage Two. Ionizing LCL. Plug depth set at 1.18. Stage Three: Synchronization start."

The plug glows. A prism of light plays along the wall as Adam closes his eyes. It's different from Unit-14. This is unfamiliar, alien to him. A sort of weirdness to it, but at the same time natural. He lets his mind drift, pulled back, slowing his breathing...

"*Pulses flowing backwards! Spike from the Core! We're getting a response!"*

"Ibuki, cut the connections!"

"I can't! She's locked us out!"

"ADAM!"

His eyes snap open. Red eyes meet his in the darkness. A scream, primal at first, turning into a terrified, girlish shriek.

And inside Cage Three, Unit-01 snaps its restraints, metal bolts bouncing off the reinforced armored walls as the eyes flash yellow. Bolts around the mouth tear and snap as the Eva grabs its head, pitching forward and slashing a deep gash into the wall with its horn before throwing its head back and screaming.

...

"Unit-01's going berserk," Maya says, face frantic, voice forced calm, as the hangar decks shake from Unit-01 stomping around its cage,

clawing at the reinforced walls as Adam's yells come over the speakers, "She's rejecting pilot control! Moving Zwei to intercept!"

Kyoko grinds her teeth, the screen in the Pinbrow box switching to Unit-02. Which stays completely immobile.

"Uri!"

"*Something's wrong. Zwei is refusing to act!"*

Kyoko swears, Allison already at Maya's side, staring at the screen as Unit-01 begins pounding on the far wall. Which is when there is a dull thud echoing through the Cages, as the camera turns to Cage 6 just in time to see the stopper Plug bounce off the wall and the green plate reattach itself to the back of the neck.

"Go-kun's ejected his shunt! He's self-activating!"

"Is Rei in there?" Kyoko demands.

"No! He's acting completely without a pilot!"

...

The girls took note the moment he decided to do something about it. Waking up, bringing his S2 engine to activation and life, he ejected the shunt, the thing which nominally allowed him to be restrained when not in combat. Arcs of light connect his spine, thought breeding action as the restraints are turned off by the MAGI itself.

No need for extraneous property damage, he explained to them. This is a matter that requires size, yes, but not power.

"I am moving to intercept. Girls, open barriers to Cage 3."

No verbal response as the locks release, Go-kun's feet twisting to their wheeled configuration, inching along as the walls retract. He can hear the impact on the walls. The divider with Cage 3 is three feet thick and he already sees the imprints of Unit-01's knuckles. Whatever he does, it will have to be quick and decisive. So, bracing his back to legs to foot configuration, the vents on his shoulder pylons open up and red light paints the wall.

"**Open the final barrier.**"

The wall slides. Caught off guard by the sudden motion, Unit-01's eyes lock with Go-kun's before the two plasma cannons fire off, blasting Ichi in the face, blinding her as she screams and Go-kun lunges. Reaches out, he grabs Unit-01 by the head, pulling her forward as the barrier shuts once again, slamming her against the far wall, pinned by her neck as Go-kun yanks off the neck plate, pulling out the Entry Plug as Unit-01's eyes flash and dim, the purple titan going limp. Holding the Entry Plug in his hand, Go-kun turns to the Cage Entrance, the staff in the Pinbrow box now assembled on the catwalks before him.

"**Unit-01 is disabled.**"

The green and yellow giant stares at the assembled scientists and technicians, and reaches up with its left hand to scratch the back of its neck.

"**I believe you would want an explanation?**"

...

It descends, a sphere of flame and black, the roar of its descent matching with the roar of its awakening. It slams into the highest peak, sending debris and lilim paraphernalia raining down along the mountains, the force of its impact bisecting the once great mountain, shockwaves of force rippling through the subcontinent and the land around it. As the smoke and debris rise, blotting the sun above, the red eyes glow in the black recesses of the skull face, tendrils unwrapping, its cocoon releasing as the Light of Its Soul lets it ascend.

Rising from what was once Mount Everest, the Angel of Might begins its trek eastward, sensing the one it has come for. Sensing the sole worthy opponent amongst the Lilim.

Ikari, it thinks, the black tendrils trailing behind it, the slow moan of its passing as it crosses the blasted landscape that was once a country, consumed in the fires of the Impact Wars.

And then it senses something. Something approaching.

It has come. A perverse mockery of the Lilim shape, bipedal, mottled green armor as it runs towards it, a single blue core at its center and a face resembling the beaked visage of Sachiel.

A Cherubim.

And then another, a swarm of birds made of light, appearing from the sky, and for a moment, Zeruel pauses. **Arael,** it thinks, but a quick shifting of its Overmind confirms that no, Arael has not come. This Cherubim has simply taken a form like her. Mocking her.

And so, forming his tendrils into blades, Zeruel charges his enemy.

...

"I see. Keep me informed."

Hanging up the phone, Yui sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Sitting up on the bed, or more to the point propped up on several pillows, Shinji waits as she stares at the phone before asking the obvious question.

"Something happened with Unit-01?"

"Sohryu held a reactivation test with the boy Kaji came back with. Have you met Adam?"

"I've met ADAM. Is he anything like that?"

"Thankfully, no," she responds with a small smile, "He's the son of our formed R&D chief, and piloted Unit-14 before its destruction. Well, Ichi went...not berserk, but panicked. She's still scared."

"She's scared of me."

Turning to him, she folds her arms.

"Ichi didn't go berserk, didn't she?" he asks, "It was me, wasn't it?"

She nods, slowly. Her face inscrutable, lips a tight line.

"Yes," she says, "It was. I thought that was what happened since the Fourth Angel, Shinji. But I never had confirmation, not until now. Not until you tore apart Raziel."

"Ichi never *has* gone berserk," he says, voice barely above a whisper, "It's always been *me.* That's why I don't get angry anymore, isn't it?"

Staring at him, she waits, grinding her teeth. Eyes closed, head

hanging, she hands clench and unclench as he stares at her with red eyes. Red eyes that are her fault.

"Yes," she says, "As far as I can tell, yes. When you first synched with Unit-01, it...for lack of a better term, absorbed part of your psyche. The reason you don't get angry anymore, Shinji, is because for lack of a better term, that part of your mind is now inside Unit-01."

"And you never told him."

Yui turns, startled, her sneaker's heel squeaking on the floor. Coming eye to eye with Asuka, she takes in the shock, the incensed anger on the girl's face as her lip trembles and she pushes past her.

"Mother wanted to talk to you about the synch experiment," she says, "I'll b-be here."

Yui nods, her lips a tight, thin line. And without another word, she turns on her heel and walks out.

...

Three levels above Terminal Dogma, all the monitor feeds in NERV-1 are fed into a main chamber nicknamed the Monitor Womb. The screens form a thirty foot half dome wall, providing small images of every camera in NERV-1's pyramid, each of which can be expanded outward to allow perfect clarity.

The two residents are currently watching the feed from Shinji's infirmary room, munching on popcorn from a tub. Not as in a large paper container of popcorn. They brought an actual cleaned out bathtub and filled it with popcorn.

"Well, that's not good," Rei sighs, "Little Mommy's in troooo~uble."

"She has done what was necessary," Kei observes, narrowing her eyes, "Without the component of Shinji's anger, Unit-01 would not have been able to engage the Fourth Angel. We all would have died. Sachiel's power was on a higher scale than many of his kin."

Rei shrugs, shoveling another handful of popcorn into her mouth, as Kei tosses in individual kernals.

"Yeah," she says, "Weee~ell, no need to worry 'bout it now. I think Go-

kun's in trouble."

"His ability to move without a pilot is a cause for distress."

They go silent, still munching popcorn.

"We seem to be overly comfortable like this," Kei says, staring at Rei, "Have you noticed?"

"I think we compliment each other."

"Compliment?"

"You knooo~ow, like peanut butter and jelly, like cheese and bread, like turnips and Kens-"

"Because of our personalities?"

Rei nods, smiling. Which is redundant, as Rei is always smiling.

"Yep! I've happy, you're serious. I'm crazy, you're scary. We can make it an act. You know, team up! Make a career outta this and take it to the bank!"

Kei raises an eyebrow. What would it be like, if they ended up teaming together, she wonders. What would it be like, years down the line...

2025. Island of Dr. Rei, off the Jersey Shore.

Standing in front of the immobile Go-kun, clad in a white labcoat and a sweater and slacks much like Little Mommy's, Rei raises her arms and her voice.

"Gentlemen, BEHOLD! I have made LOVE to this machine!"

She stumbles slightly, holding her backside as if sore.

"And in retrospect...I wonder why."

Standing in front of the raised platform, Rei, and the deflowered Evangelion, Kei raises an eyebrow, folding her arms as her face screws in confusion.

"I guess...because it was...scientific?"

"NO!" Rei yells, accusing finger pointed at Kei, "It was because he was DRUNK! And EASY! And he had NO idea what he was doing!"

Go-kun pitches forward, jaw opening as the Evangelion hacks up a large metal ball which lands in front of Kei, four legs bursting out as seven eyes open on the shell with a shout of "SKREEEEE!"

"MY BABY BOY!"

"Perhaps," Kei says, and shrugs, taking the remote from Rei, "We should check up on Ichi."

...

The birds of light are a flock. Dozens of them, raining down beams of white upon Zeruel as he advances, trailing tendrils behind him as the green humanoid form of the other Cherubim breaks into a run, crossing the wastes of Mongolia in a furious charge, shrieking a battlecry as it bears its claws and leaps at the Angel.

Zeruel's eyes light up and release a blast of raw power. The Cherubim melts, turning into liquid and wrapping around the wake and light of the blast before re-forming into a massive fist which slams into the Angel, flattening it against the desert floor as the tendrils flail.

The form melts once more, re-forming into the bipedal form as the tendrils wrap around its leg, picking it up and hammering it into the ground as Zeruel rises above it. The swarm of birds hammers him with light, the air shifting red as the blasts are intercepted by a wall of shimmering light, the Angel of Might tilting its head up and releasing a blast which vaporizes half of them.

Which is when the third Cherubim clears the horizon. It dwarfs Zeruel, at least four times his size, a massive pillar of white resembling a human face adorned with a gigantic white helm, a single blue core at the center of its forehead, surrounded by a red line which bisects the body. The red eyes glow and the creature descends, Zeruel unfolding his overmind to contact it.

You are garbage.

Trash.

Father has said above all, you must be destroyed.

Humiliated.

Laid low like the simpering parasite you are.

I am the Spear of God.

Angel of Walls

I am Turel

And you are NOTHING.

...

"The Angel has been engaged by three Cherubim," Maya reports as Pieter enters Central Dogma, "They're attacking the Angel on the Chinese border."

The screens feed in from satellites, showing the conflagration as the Angel, the mass of tentacles and metallic face, lays down blasts of fire on the humanoid creature clawing at it as the massive shape overshadows all of them.

"I thought you said we had four blue patterns," he observes.

"We did. But one of them disappeared as soon as it was reported," Makoto responds, already tapping at his console as a graph history comes up next to the Big Screen, "Whatever it was, it was huge!"

Pieter nods. Arms folded, he watches the battle, as the floor below him shimmers and Junior hovers next to him.

"Thoughts?"

The Cherubim target Zeruel specifically. There is...hate...from them. Directed solely at Zeruel. This is...disturbing.

...

The humanoid Cherubim pauses. Its shoulders bulge out, two claw like protrusions folding out from each shoulder as a whip like tail slams into the ground. The birds of light have already retreated as Turel begins its descent, the humanoid cherubim folding out its shoulders and releasing two blasts of light which slam against Zeruel's field before the Angel responds in kind.

The desert beneath them glasses, the Cherubim's flesh bulging and surrounding itself in a sphere which takes the blast before the tail slashes out like a whip.

Another blast, and another as Zeruel presses the attack, before his tendrils fold upwards into two sphere on either side of him before stabbing out as two long black blades. The cherubim's arms fall to the ground, spraying blue ichor on the desert as Zeruel turns his attention to the descending Cherubim...and a blast of blue slams into his field. The beam hammers the AT Field, the descending mass of Turel beginning to glow red, the eyes locked with Zeruel's own.

More fields unfold from Zeruel's core, the desert lighting up with the conflagration as the sand glasses beneath them, the beam of blue slamming into the unfolding AT Fields as the mountains around them begin to crumble. Turel begins to crack at the seams, the red crevice becoming larger as it pours more and more power into the blast, met with Zeruel's own defense.

And then Zeruel's eyes light up, the beam slicing through Turel's own and slamming into its face, shattering it as stone like cherubic matter rains down on the mongolians wastes. The Cherubim shudders and descends, slamming into the desert, blue ichor painting the glass like ground as Zeruel floats towards it, standing over the prone enemy. Then his eyes light up and the blast slams into Turel's core. The explosion could be seen from orbit. When the light clears, the desert is a single, uninterrupted pane of glass. There is but one inhabitant in it, one creature standing.

And Zeruel continues his advance eastward.

...

Misato found Asuka typing at the small office Yui had given her for the times she had to stay on base longer than agreed upon. Silently, Misato approaches, watching Asuka view file after file before a catty, mischievous grin crosses her face. Reaching into her jacket, she takes

out the small can of coffee, still cold in her hand, and presses it against the back of Asuka's neck.

Asuka shrieks, turning and glaring, her expression softening when she sees Misato.

"Hey," Misato says, handing Asuka the coffee, "Thought you'd be with Shinji."

"Dr. Ikari came back to watch over him."

"Dr. Ikari? No Yui?"

Asuka shakes her head, sighing.

"I'm not...h-happy with her," she sighs, "She's kept a lot of things f-from Shinji. It d-doesn't s-seem right."

"Well, she's a mother. Mothers do that to protect their kids, or at least that's what they tell themselves. Whatcha working on?"

Asuka blinks, and turns back to the screen.

"Ichi," she says, "I'm trying to f-figure out what makes Ichi so s-special."

...

"So, you have a lot of questions," Yui says, sitting in the chair as Shinji stares at her, "First off, are you feeling better?"

"A little," he says, and sucks his teeth, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure Asuka's pissed at you, but I calmed her down. Mom, I've been getting flashes of things I saw inside the Core. I remember seeing something...weird."

She nods, taking out her PDA and clicking on a program. The security cameras pause and turn off, the lights flickering off.

"Okay."

...

"S-so, what I've found is some...files...deep in the MAGI," Asuka says,

the screen showing several files, each with a prominent lock icon, "And I've tried all the access codes. They're YHWH clearance."

"Yahweh?"

"MAGI clearance levels are based on orders of Angels," Asuka explains, tapping her wrist as the orange outline of her specialty tool appears, "Dominion, Grigori, Archangel, Cherubim, Seraphim, Throne. Highest is Throne, which is Dr. Ikari and the Commander. But YHWH is above that."

Misato blinks. The files unlock as Asuka waves her hand, the tool disappearing.

"There," Asuka says, "From wh-what I can tell, the only person with YHWH clearance is Naoko Akagi, since she d-designed the MAGI."

Misato nods, as the files open, three reports now prominently displayed on Asuka's screen.

"What are those?" Asuka asks.

"Medical reports," Misato says, squinting, "They're medical reports of Yui. They're right after...that's right after the Contact Experiment, isn't it?"

Asuka stares at them, reading them. Blocking out Misato's voice, she takes in the data, examining the facts presented to her. Fact one; set after the Contact experiment, meaning right before Dr. Ikari's hospitalization due to the damage she suffered during it due to partial absorption

Wait, that means that this has a list of what was absorbed;

And Ichi came online two years after the Contact Experiment, officially, but what does that mean? Right, Ichi had access to the MAGI and audio/visual feeds, but it was passive, observation.

Mother never figured out how Unit-01 was brought online. Yui believes Synthesis didn't work.

Dr. Ikari believed that Mother used her in a Contact Experiment with Zwei, to explain her own problems. But that wasn't it, Mother figured out Synthesis on her own.

Meaning that Dr. Ikari knew what a Contact Experiment would do to

cause an Eva to activate, meaning-

"Oh my *GOD!*" Asuka yells, standing up, nearly knocking Misato back as the chair clatters to the floor. Misato grabs her, turning her around, the panic evident on Asuka's face.

"Asuka, what?"

"It's Ichi."

She blinks, turning to Misato.

"I know what Ichi is."

...

"I remember hearing a conversation," Shinji says, hands on his lap, staring at his mother, "It was...I was four. It was right after the Contact Experiment, but the conversation was in the Core. Unit-01 was watching it through a camera feed."

"What did they say," Yui asks.

Her face, though, says that she already knows. That she already has that answer. Shinji's face screws in concentration. His red eyes narrow.

"It was a doctor. Not Aunt Naoko or anyone else, but just a doctor. 'I'm sorry, Mrs. Ikari. But we lost the baby.'"

Yui nods.

"Mom," Shinji says, "Be honest, please. Is Ichi my little sister?"

They stare at each other. It feels like hours, like days, but it is only seconds until Yui slowly, shakily, nods.

"Ichi's real name is Rei Ikari," she says, "I was four weeks pregnant when we held the Contact Experiment. I didn't know until the doctor told me that night."

Chapter 68: Recollection

"To say my experience in Vegas at NHIS was unpleasant would be like saying water is wet. For all his being a weaselly little shit, Tokita was one of the two people at NHIS who referred to me as a person and not a product. The other was Kaji."

Sipping her water bottle, Mana pauses, staring at the camera.

"Yeah, first thing that son of a bitch did was have me be the showroom girl at the convention he was holding," Mana says, hands clenching and unclenching on her knees, "Turns out my killing Rampel drove up interest in NHIS's cyborg soldiers. To make sure I was a good girl, he remote disabled my arms and legs, too. Like a fucking mannequin."

She pauses again. Her teeth grind, her lips a thin line on her face.

"Yeah," she says, "Spencer's dead. I didn't kill him. God knows I fucking wanted to, though. I wanted to kill that son of a bitch with my bare hands."

"You can finish this later, if you want," Kaji says, looking up from behind the camera. She stares at the lens, shifting in the metal folding chair, the sterile white room in contrast to her dark fatigues and the whirring of her fingers.

"Yeah, well the bitch of it is that I read the reports about New Vegas, about the Chairman. The thing that pisses me off about Spencer is that he honestly couldn't give half a shit about world domination or power. That bastard just wanted to make money."

The mask slips, slightly. Her lip trembles as her hands wring on her lap.

"What the fuck is wrong with the world if people do shit like that for money?"

Chapter 68: Recollection

Walking along the park on the surface of Tokyo-3, Lieutenant Shigeru

Aoba whistles to himself, hands in his pockets as he takes the scenic route home. It is a beautiful day, with the sun shining, the air crisp and warm, and there is not a care in the world for him to be concerned about. Which is when he hears the rustling in the bushes, and stops, staring as a pair of three fingered hands part the leaves, and a bone white face with three holes stares back.

"Hey there, little fella," he says, eyes meeting that of the Israfim, "You lost?"

The little creature's face turns, before snapping back into place with an audible click. It stumbles out, arms above its head, resembling a green and silver chimpanzee as it walks over to Aoba as the bridge bunny squats down, opening his mouth to speak.

Which is precisely when the Israfim leaps onto him, wrapping arms and legs around Aoba's head before mercilessly thrusting its crotch into Aoba's face. Screaming, Aoba stumbles about, clawing at the Israfim as he receives a face full of subangelic genitalia, shrieking, albeit muffled, as the brown haired man in the crisp, blue and brown NERV uniform walks into frame, hands folded at his waist.

"*AH! GET IT OFFGETITOFF!"*

"While the Israfim have become a designer pet in Tokyo-3, we at NERV ask that you act responsibly when it comes to owning one," he says, his voice deep, fatherly, "I'm Pieter Sohryu, Sub-Director of NERV. If you find an Israfim on the street and you want to keep it as a pet, act responsibly. Dozens of new Israfim are being born every hour. Please, spay *and* neuter your Israfim, as they possess both sets of genitalia. Bring your Israfim to a NERV clinic and we will perform the operation at a very low cost. Your Israfim will have a longer, healthier, happier life, and you will have done your part for your community."

"IT'S RAPING MY FACE!"

"Thank you," Pieter says, and the camera light turns off, the Israfim looking up and ceasing its humping of Aoba, jumping off of him as Mari walks out from behind the camera. Aoba has already grabbed the bottle of mouthwash from Pieter, vigorously rinsing and spitting, gagging and almost weeping.

"Life saver, man," Mari says, high fiving the Israfim, "Hope you don't mind that we're telling Tokyo-3 to remove your nuts."

Eh, don't worry about it, Rami. We got enough that we have a stable population.

The Israfim waves, and dives back into the bushes, leaves rustling as it escapes back into the wild.

"Like a face full of angel wing wong," Aoba mutters, wiping his mouth, "It's not going to make me pregnant, is it?"

"Nah, we spayed and neutered that one," Pieter says, slapping him on the back, "Did we ever figure out what their main diet is?"

"I think birds. And hubcaps."

"Good to know."

The phones ring. Pieter takes his, opening it.

"Sohryu."

"*Sub Director, we need you back at the base,"* Lieutenant Makoto's voice rings in his ears, "*The Angel has just engaged the Chinese Army."*

...

Blinking, Shinji comes out of his latest bout of unconsciousness. Mom left after a while, the two talking for a bit about what she told him. Even if he was perfectly right in the head, even if he could get angry...he's not sure if he would. Maybe that's where everything changed.

He tries to sit up. Fails. Wonders if he's gotten weaker, but when he just came out of his coma he wasn't even able to try. Ah, okay. That's why.

He looks down, spots the red hair on his chest and the NERV uniform jacket draped over them both. Even as weak as he is, he smiles.

She blinks, their eyes meeting as she stirs. The starched material of her uniform blouse presses against his hospital gown as she reaches up, pulling herself up and pressing her lips against his, his freed arms wrapping around her, their eyes closed as her PDA, forgotten in her hand, drops and bounces on the floor.

"Hey," he breathes.

She smiles back, blinking and sitting up to find her PDA on the floor, the screen flickering.

"Oh d-damn it," she sighs, "I h-had all my research there, to."

She turns back, not noticing that she's currently straddling him, Shinji grunting as she sits up.

"I found something important," she says, "About Ichi. You have to hear this. Ichi is-"

"My little sister who was absorbed during the Contact Experiment."

She blinks, staring at him.

"Mom told me," he says, "Sorry."

...

The explosions ripple across the shimmering field, the monster behind it staring down the assembled military might. Hundreds of tanks fire in staggered unison, shells that could devastate buildings stopping dozens of yards from the face of the Angel of Might as he hangs in the air in front of them, casually shifting his face as the jets fly by, bombarding him from above with clustered explosives.

In Central Dogma, Pieter stares at the image, arms folded as the Chinese military throws their armaments at Zeruel. From what he can tell, Zeruel is just waiting for them to make it interesting.

"Junior."

Junior appears, his hologram shimmering next to Pieter as Maya calls out telemetry, calling out relative strength of the Angel's AT Field.

Zeruel is unharmed. I do not believe anything that is thrown at him will be able to harm him.

"No chance they could take him out for us?"

Junior shakes his head. Nodding, Pieter turns back to the bridge bunnies.

"Lieutenant Makoto, has the chinese government received our offer to deploy an Evangelion?"

"Received, sir," Hyuga responds, "They have turned us down. They told us they do not want NERV to enter their country."

Zeruel's eyes light up. The screen flashes, Maya screaming and Pieter covering his eyes. Where an entire division of over 100 tanks were, there is now a glowing cross of red light stretching into the sky. More tanks move into positions, shells and rockets firing off, artillery positions sending shells loaded with explosives which splash against the AT Field. Turning to the rockets mounted on the mesa as they fire, Zeruel brings one mass of tendrils up, compressing into a ball before thrusting out, breaking the sound barrier before collapsing the mesa. The explosion rips through it, sending debris flying as another tendril flies out, slashing across the ground and bissecting tanks, men, and armor.

Over the horizon, another squadron of jets flies by, launching missiles and dropping fuel air bombs, rippling across Zeruel's AT Field as it shimmers above. Making a mental count, Pieter sees two hundred tanks lined up, barrels raised before they all fire at once, slamming into the Angel's field, a crack running down it before the shells slam into the black flesh of the Angel.

"They cracked the field?" Pieter asks.

No. Zeruel has moved it.

Shimmering above the tanks, the field appears, topped by another, then another, until nearly a dozen in total appear...

Before slamming down into their midst, flattening the tanks and men, painting the desert with gore and fuel.

And then another blast, and they are gone.

"Sir!" Maya shouts, "They've launched a missile!"

"What kind," Pieter asks, teeth grit.

"DF-41," Maya shouts, "Confirmed! Sir, they launched a *nuclear missile* at the Angel!"

"Opaque the visual feed!" Pieter shouts, "NOW!"

The screen turns near dark. Even so, everyone turns away, covering their eyes as the Angel looks up and the missile, twice as tall as he is, slams into him. The entire image becomes white, the speakers cutting a split second after the terrible roar fills Dogma. Satellite feeds kick in, showing the mushroom cloud rising, the crater where the Angel, and a good portion of China's military, once stood.

"What was the yield?" Pieter asks.

"3 warhead MIRV," Makoto says, "All three warheads hit the target. Total yield...15 megatons."

"Let's see it survive that," Pieter says with a grin, "Get me a visual."

The image clears, filters cutting through the dust, a slow outline forming. And Pieter's grin disappears when he sees the Angel floating in the crater, completely unharmed.

Zeruel is laughing. The radiation tickles him.

Pieter growls, clenching his fists.

He says that he hopes this is not the best you can do.

"Yeah," he says, "Get me the Commander. And get me Berlin."

...

The single light shines down, illuminating the form of Yui Ikari. Eleven of the twelve monoliths are lit. 05 is still silent.

"The Angel has been unaffected by the attack of the military," 07 intones, "Perhaps China would have been wiser to accept the aid of NERV."

"I would advice you against speaking ill of my home country," 10 growls, "Many people have died today."

"Many more will if we don't have a consensus," Yui says, "Chairman, we need the Mark 06."

01 speaks with the distorted voice of Kaworu Nagisa.

"Unfortunately, Kihl had partially dismantled the Mark 06's core containment unit before his passing," he says, "My technicians are still

reassembling it. It will be at least another week until the Mark 06 is operational."

"Then we need to find an alternative," 06, her father, says, "The Angel must be stopped, no matter the cost. Our plans are for naught if the Angel destroys the Geofront and Lilith. Dr. Ikari, can the Lance of Longinius be used?"

She shakes her head. Fresh memories of the rampage of the white giant in Terminal Dogma, followed by that falling out with her son.

"No. Lilith has become aware. If she is not restrained, she is as great a danger as the other Angels," she says, "Considering the current mental state of Unit-01, I am working on an alternative to activate it. We may need backup, though."

A silent murmur from the monoliths. 06 speaks for them.

"We shall prepare the Nine."

And the room goes dark.

...

He sleeps, resting in the infirmary bed. It has been a day, and he still can't really find the will to move. He feels...exhausted. Not just in body but in mind. Like a good chunk of his soul is missing. Well, technically it's been missing since he came to NERV, but that's assuming Mom told him the truth.

Idly, he listens to the video of Mana explaining what happened to her in Vegas. Maybe he still has some anger in him, because he certainly wants to kill that son of a bitch, to. He's always considered her a friend, if not a close friend, but hearing how she was paraded around like a show model, well...

He drifts off. His body once more surrenders to exhaustion, his mind wandering. A distant throbbing in the back of his head as the white walls of the infirmary blur and melt.

He feels like he is falling, but falling sideways, falling upwards. A voice in his head, deep within the core of his being, says his name.

And he finds himself on a blank, featureless plain.

"Sandalphon{Metatron(Iris)[Enkidu/Coyote/]}, this is the one{slayer[warrior we (feared) saw] of Father}?"

Yes. But you must limit yourself. If he sees us as we truly are, he may break.

He recognizes the voice. Junior's.

Looking up, there is something above him. Something shifting, like a great statue carved out of granite, or a massive shape of stone and bone and flesh. It is both at the same time, radiating light, heat, and fear, yet at the same time chilling him to the bone.

"***We see[understand{question(don't wish to die)}that] what you [it is{your motives}(like the others)very small] mean."***

He looks up. There is an outline in the sky above him, one of the shapes holding up the sky turning to him.

He is the proper one. Please. You know why.

"Zeruel[Gabriel{Maarduk(Horus is) is} is] is coming."

The light fills the outline, becoming a great bird of light in the blackened sky above him. He cannot make out any other shape of it, save for the wings, illuminating the plane around him.

Which is when the pillar of light lances out and envelops him, and he *sees.*

...

An isolated signal goes out, a single message upon which a document is attached sent to a particular cell phone's message box. The phone beeps, and Kei Ayanami sits up, the ringing musing her from a pleasant nap she was having. Opening the phone, she narrows her eyes. A single document opens, and her red eyes trace across the name on it.

Rei Ikari.

The document outlines everything; absorption, theories, the overall plan Little Mommy had. Everything.

Shaking her head, she stands up. She has to find Little Mommy. Find out what that means. She would have the answers for her, of course.

And so would Rei. She remembers the look Rei had during Raziel, when Little Mommy was yelling at Unit-01. A knowing look, a...of course.

Rei knows, to. She's been lied to about this, hasn't she?

...

The light burns, shining down on him. He can see himself. He can see himself when he was four, in his mother's hospital room as she cried. He can see himself on his first day of piloting, when there was that pulling and the Eva took something out of him. He can see himself in the Dirac sea, when he met Ichi for the first time, when they saved each other from that miserable fate.

"*What do you see?"* the voice intones, "*Your memories. They make you what you are. Do you accept them? Or do they hurt you?"*

The slap in the face from his first casualty. Meeting his sisters for the first time, Kiko almost dying just to spend time with him.

"*Guilt. Lilim emotion. Fascinating."*

He sees New Vegas all over again. The city collapsing around him. Rage burning through his veins like liquid fire. He watches as thousands die from his incompetence, his bloodlust. He watches as Ichi rejects him, pushing him away.

"*She is important to you. Why is she important to you?"*

Because she is.

The light parts, slightly. A finger, gangly, green and silver walks in. The two cores at its center form a yin yang, its three hole face twisting slightly. Looking up at the bird of light, Israfel stands next to Shinji, its arms hanging loosely at its side.

She is important to him the way each of us value our kin.

On Shinji's other side, Junior appears, more defined, more majestic than before. His dorsal fin runs the length of his back, the core set in his mouth proudly beaming like a precious gemstone. His tail swishes

back and forth as he looks up towards the bird of light.

Arael. He must see.

The light recedes. The bird descends, forming into an outline of light, like a great taloned raptor hovering above him, the two Angels on either side of him saying nothing. Slowly, Shinji rises, staring at the shape, staring at the light.

"Why am I here?" he asks.

Zeruel is coming.

Junior's mouth tendrils twitch.

He is coming for you.

...

On the outskirts of Tokyo-3, the alarms begin to go off. Missile batteries come to life and release their payload, firing off batteries of warheads at the approaching target. Dozens, hundreds of missiles fire out, hitting supersonic speeds before slamming into the transparent wall.

The water off the coast boils, as the soft, alien song marks its coming.

Clearing the cloud cover, the metal grimace stares down at the pitiful Lilim defenses. Black tendrils trail behind as it descends towards the city, and a burst of light from its eyes collapses the cliffside into the sea.

And in Central Dogma, Pieter watches with grim fascination. That was their forward batteries. All of them. They managed to delay several of the Angels earlier on, but this one took them out with one shot.

"Status?" he asks.

"Angel is on approach. Estimating 15 minutes until he's in range of Tokyo-3."

He nods, looking up as on the highest area of Central Dogma, Gendo takes his position. The Supreme Commander of NERV has been scarce

this past week, which is understandable. The status change of his son, the completely clusterf_ of New Vegas, and the approaching Angel have more or less left Pieter in charge of NERV.

"Keep me on a per minute update," Pieter says, "What's the location of the pilots?"

"Second Child is in Project E labs with Dr. Sohryu," Aoba calls out, "Third Child is in the Infirmary. Fourth Child is in the mens locker rooms. MAGI can't find the First or Sixth Child."

"Understood. And Katsuragi?"

"On her way back from forward positions, Sub Director."

He nods. Looking up at the Commander, they exchange a glance and a silent nod. He turns on his heel, walking towards the lift, taking out his PDA and bringing up a particular location on the screen.

"Commander, bridge is yours," he says, "Have Katsuragi and Akagi report to the bridge as soon as they arrive. I'm going to go find Ayanami. Prep Go-kun for launch."

The lift doors close, the cabin speeding down. He feels the pull upwards, gravity lightening slightly for him before hitting him back in the gut, the doors opening to reveal yet another sterile, metal hallway. Walking out, fists clenched, he looks at the PDA and walks outside the door, arms folded. Glancing at the stylized female silhouette, he taps his feet and glares.

Which has the desired effect. The door to the locker room opens, and Yui jumps back when she sees him, yelping. Although, Pieter steps back himself, noticing what Yui is wearing. The silver, skin tight suit, covering her from neck to toe, black along the waist and outside of her legs, iridescent blue piping glowing along the seams as the computers start up, with a black 01 stenciled above her chest. Coughing, he looks up, scratching the back of his neck.

"Okay," he says, "Yui, what the *Hell* are you doing?"

"I have an idea to get Unit-01 working," she says, tapping the button on the side of her wrist, the holographic screen popping into existence in front of her, "Ichi isn't listening to Shinji, she didn't react favorably to Adam either. So putting another pilot isn't going to work."

She fixes the two A-10 connectors to the top of her head, the two

flickering to life with a steady blue glow.

"What's your idea?" he asks, keeping his eyes on her face.

"She will listen to her Mommy," she responds.

With that, she turns and begins walking towards the cages. Watching her go, prying his eyes from her retreating posterior, he begins walking after her, muttering to himself as he follows.

"Pieter, I don't need your help with this," she says, tapping on her onboard computer.

He grabs her by the arm, spinning her around. She glares at him, and she glares back, backing away from him and folding her arms. Growling, scratching his head, they remain silent for a moment, before he finally relents and speaks up.

"Look, the Angel's on its way here. Katsuragi will be at the bridge in a few minutes, and Rei's missing. We need to find Rei and get her to Go-kun before we do anything."

She nods. Checking her computer, she stares at it, as a message comes across. The color drains from her face as she looks at the message and the data running across it.

"Oh *damn,*" she whispers, "I just figured out where Rei is."

She turns, walking past him and towards the elevator. Grumbling, Pieter follows, running after her.

"Okay, what did I miss?" he asks.

"MAGI was just uploaded with a scenario file labeled 230001," she says, "It's called 'Everybody Dies.'"

...

"Coming for me," Shinji says, slowly, shakily standing up, "What do you mean, he's coming for me?"

Israfel and Junior stare at each other, then turn back to Shinji, the Bird of Light hovering over them all, gently illuminating the featureless plain.

Zeruel is afraid of one thing, Israfel says, **He is afraid of you.**

"That...that thing killed three Cherubim, took a nuclear missile to the *face* and it's *afraid* of me?"

The light shines down upon him again, music playing softly between his ears. His knees feel weak, and he looks up to see past the bird there is a great ring of light hovering over them.

You have battled the Father. You have slain more of that which you call Angels than any other. You are the one whom the Angels fear, Pilot Ikari. He is coming to do battle with you, as you are the only one upon the Earth whom he feels is his equal.

Another soft pulse of light. The music is a bit louder, a bit more comforting.

He is coming to challenge you, Junior says, **And he will kill all before him unless it is you. He must be stopped, Pilot Ikari. But you cannot pilot, now.**

"Because Ichi's scared of me."

Safe..?

Why is she scared? Israfel asks, **Do you believe it is your fault?**

He sees again. He sees the rage, feels the anger and bloodlust. Sees himself, covered in the gore of Raziel, reaching down into the Core, to pull her out, and her screaming when she sees him.

Collapsing to his knees, he clenches his eyes shut. Images play over his eyelids. His first meeting her, their saving each other against ADAM, seeing her in person for the first time in the MAGI. The birthday party, the small chats he had with her when he was younger. All of that, played over with the image of her screaming in terror at him-

Safe?

And he looks up. She is shimmering, standing in front of him. Her purple dress is glowing bright white, her blue eyes glowing. Her hair waves around her, her entire form pulsing with the power within her now. For a brief moment, Ichi and Shinji's eyes meet.

You should talk to her, Junior says, resting a hand on Shinji's shoulder, **This cannot be solved by violence or power. This can**

only be solved by you.

Shinji reaches out, reaching his hand towards her. Ichi gasps, backing away, and disappears. Collapsing back into his seat, he holds his head in his hands, the tears running freely down his cheeks. Junior lowers his head, shaking his mouth tendrils, as Israfel looks to him and at the floating Angel above them.

"Damn it," Shinji whispers, "Damn it. I'm going to have to go around Mom's back, aren't I? I mean...I mean, Dad probably doesn't know about her, does he? Mom never told him about what Ichi is."

The light pulses. It pulses stronger, stronger than it did before, and the Bird of Light lowers its wings for a moment. The voice of the song softens.

Then he should be told, it whispers between his ears.

Another beat, another note of the song.

A father should know of their child.

Shinji rises, slowly, painfully. Looking up at the Angel, for a moment he can make out the human outline within it. The soft, knowing smile on whatever face it had, before the light dies down and releases him. And he opens his eyes, and disappears.

"Do you think it worked?"

Junior turns to the new voice.

We can hope. He is the one we think he is. Or at least, he can become it. He has his part to play.

Mari nods, a faint, sad half smile on her face.

"Yeah. And so do I."

...

Another explosion, ripping into a cross shape of red flame rises into the sky. Tokyo-3 lowers into the ground, barriers rising, for all the good they shall do. The shape descends from the clouds, black tendrils trailing behind it as the skull grimace stares down upon the Fortress City.

The Angel of Might has come.

...

The doors to Sheol open, and Yui sprints down the metal hallway, the boots of her plugsuit echoing against the metal. Pieter follows in quick pursuit, sidearm already unholstered, running right behind her as the sounds of tearing metal already begin to echo.

"This is the only place they can go where the MAGI can't find them," Yui says, "She has to be here!"

Another bang against the metal walls, and the floor shakes. Clicking the button on her right gauntlet, she points it at the double doors at the end of the hallway. Gears grint and they open, and Yui skids to a stop. All the cylinders are broken, the floor slick with LCL. And standing in the middle of it, eyes red, bloodshot, and hands clenched into fists, Kei Ayanami stares down her mother.

"You lied to me," she says, voice barely above a whisper, still holding her PDA in her hand.

"Kei," Yui says, "Kei, where are your sisters?"

"You *lied,*" Kei growls, "But that's what you do, isn't it? You never trust us with anything. You just tell us what we want to hear. You let us believe what we want to believe and you think we'll never find out. Is that it?"

"Kei," Yui says, holding up an arm, keeping Pieter back, "Kei, calm down. Please. I don't know how you found out about Ichi, but that doesn't change anything. Please, just calm down. We need to talk."

With a scream, Kei tosses the PDA, Yui and Pieter ducking out of the way as it shatters on the far wall.

"She's not *her!"* Kei yells, "She's not the baby! She thought she was your daughter because you wanted her to think she was your daughter! Just like me, just like *Rei,* just like *Siyon* and *Iti* and *Nana* and *Kiko* and *Zyuu!* But that's not what we are, are we? We're just replacements because you didn't want *Ichi* to be lonely, aren't we? We're just there to keep her *company* aren't we?"

"Kei-"

"You *lied* to me," Kei shouts, "You *lied* to me when I asked you! I was never your favorite, was I? It was always her, wasn't it?"

The tears stream down her face, dripping on the floor. But moreso than that, Pieter can see the ashen look on Yui's face, recoiling as if struck.

"Kei," she whispers, "Please-"

"And worst of all," Kei says, "You taught us because you told us we were your children. You taught us everything. You taught us lying was *wrong.* Or was that another lie?"

She clenches her fists again, her chest hitching, grabbing at her hair.

"Kei," Yui says, "Kei, we know about 230001."

Kei looks up, eyes going wide.

"Kei, where are your sisters?" Yui asks, "Tell me. Now."

Kei looks around. The capsules are empty, vacant. They were when she arrived, expecting to demand answers from the others, about how long they *knew* about Ichi, about the real Rei Ikari. But the capsule were all empty.

Which is when the vent to her right opens and Rei dives through, slamming her fist into Kei's face, sending her flying across the room. She lands in a crouch, rising, cracking her knuckles as the other vents break open and the other Ree drop down, staring at Kei, their faces devoid of their normal smiles.

"Rei," Yui says, "Get to Go-kun. We need you to pi-"

Kei screams. The air turns opaque as she throws out her arms at her sisters, metal rending under the pulse of her AT Field as her eyes glow. And the floor collapses underneath Yui and Pieter, sending them tumbling down with a scream...

...

"Angel has reached Tokyo-3 perimeter," Maya calls out, "Fourth Child enroute to Unit-02!"

"Great," Misato growls, "Status on the First Child! Get Rei into Go-kun

and launch her at the Angel!"

Another set of alarms blare. Looking up, they see the readings begin chiming off, the image of Cage 5 and Go-kun appearing center on the Big Screen.

"Ma'am," Makoto yells, "Go-kun just self-activated! He's over riden the MAGI and it energizing Track 7!"

Misato turns, looking for some clarification from the Commander, finding him only staring intently at the Big Screen. Rails flash and Go-kun's cradle launches, shooting off at supersonic speeds towards the surface.

And outside of Tokyo-3, the exit doors release and Go-kun rises, released from the restraints, stomping out as the Angel descends, floating upon the waving tendrils. Slowly, Go-kun curls his left hand into a fist, eyes glowing, the light on his chest pulsing with the power of his S2 engine.

"**Angel,**" Go-kun says, "**You will go no further. The forces of Mankind will stand against you. For every step you take, you will pay dearly. For every life you have taken, you will pay. We will fight to the last breath. We will fight to the last man. And if you wish to enter this city, you will do so only past me.**"

The Angel does not reply. The tendrils ball up, forming into two spheres before lancing out, shooting across the distance and towards Go-kun. And Go-kun brings its fist up, the light on its chest glowing before the field of plasma slams against the tendrils, forcing the Angel back. The locks around his jaws release, and Go-kun charges, Zeruel reeling back as the four legged Evangelion opens its hand.

"**You will go NO FURTHER! If you wanted a fight, it's RIGHT HERE!**"

His eyes glow. The crystal at the center of the palm glows, light gathering around the hand as Go-kun closes the distance, his drill spinning to full speed.

"**This hand of mine is *BURNING RED! It's fire tells me to grasp victory!***"

Closing the hand into a fist, a glowing spike of orange white light blasts out of his left elbow as he brings it back, slamming his fist into the glowing AT Field. The spike blossoms out before slamming into

the field, shattering it as Go-kun's fist slams into Zeruel's chest.

"***Burning-"***

One blast, the Angel's eyes glowing, another AT Field cracking.

"***GOD-"***

Another field shattering, Go-kun's fists hanging inches before Zeruel's core.

"***FINGER!"***

And the blast issues forth, as the battle is joined-

...

And Yui opens her eyes, finding herself breathing fluid. Swimming up to the surface, she coughs, yellowish liquid spurting out of her throat, vision blurry before a pair of hands grab her, pulling her along. She grabs at the metal, pulled to the solid metal ground, climbing onto her hands and knees as Pieter coughs out the LCL next to her.

"Crap," he mutters.

She blinks, clearing the LCL out of her eyes, and looks up. The room is red. Very, very red. Red with an orange tint, the orange coming from the massive doors behind them, large enough to accommodate several Evangelions.

And turning around, she sees Lilith, still impaled upon the Lance of Longinius, upon the LCL lake of Terminal Dogma.

"Oh...*flurgen.*"

...

And in the infirmary in NERV-1, Shinji opens his eyes.

Ikari.

The voice echoes between his ears. The voice of the Angel of Might. The voice of the monster that has come to Tokyo-3 for him. To kill

him, and everything between the Angel and him.

Slowly, painfully, he rises from the bed. Slowly, painfully, he stands. And slowly, stumbling with every step, he begins to walk out.

Chapter 69: Carnage

The drill slams into and through the AT Field, shattering it as the shards of energy fade to nothingness, stabbing into the black flesh of the Angel of Might and sending a spray of blue blood. Mouth open, Go-kun roars, tendrils wrapped around his other arm. Shoulder vents open and missiles fly out, exploding in the shifting form of Zeruel.

The eyes of the Angel flicker and flash, and Go-kun ducks, slamming his head into the Angel's body, ramming his face into the AT Field as the blast goes over, slamming into the armored shell of the Fortress City and sending a cross of red light into the sky as the ground buckles beneath them. Step by step, Go-kun's feet dig into the ground, into the metal and rock that makes the shell of the Geofront, pulling free his hand and slamming his fist into Zeruel's face.

He breaks free, firing bolts of plasma from his shoulder pylons at the Angel, deflecting them off of the AT Field. Thrusters fire and Go-kun slides back, holding his drill arm high before leaping, folding in on himself into his subterranean mode before drilling into the ground, narrowly missing the tendril blades that shoot out and bounce off the shell of the city.

The Angel of Might pauses. It scans the area, slowly, expanding his Overmind to sense where its opponent has gone.

And the answer comes when Go-kun bursts fist-first from the ground, uppercutting the Angel and sending them both into the sky.

...

And in Cage Two, Uriel Dolheb Sohryu sees the battle thanks to the video receiver in his black, green piped plugsuit. He is only thankful that Annette's parents came for her when they arrived in Tokyo-3. At least she is safe, back in Okayama.

Walking, he walks across the catwalk, standing in front of Unit-02...in front of Zwei. He remembers how Asuka would always call the Eva that, when they were younger. When he could deny how horrible a human being he was under the pretense of trying to save the world. His knuckles crack and the material of the plugsuit creaks as he balls his fists, gripping the railing, staring at Zwei's impassive, unlit face.

"Why won't you work for me," he whispers.

Mother said it may be a good idea to send Asuka out in Zwei. He wouldn't hear of it. He isn't going to send his sister out to fight that monster. Not when he should be out there. He has trained for this for his *entire life,* and now the only tool which can be used, the only weapon which can fight it, will not let him pilot.

"Why now?" he asks, his voice soft, surprising for the frustration and anger, "Why now? Why won't you let me pilot? What am I to you?"

And Unit-02's eyes light up. And Zwei's voice fills the Cage, and confirms that fear deep in the pit of Uri's soul.

"**ANGEL.**"

Chapter 69: Carnage

This is not good, is the main thought entering the mind of Pieter Sohryu, Sub Director of NERV. He stares at the white giant, pinned to the LCL lake by the massive spear, and knows that being this close to it is playing havoc with his nerves, with his senses, with his mind.

He tries to focus. Keeps his mind on the task at hand. The doors to Terminal Dogma are designed to be opened from the outside, not the inside, and the boat crew patrolling was rotated out and the new one wasn't put in after Lilith got loose two weeks ago. He keeps telling himself that, figuring out his options, when the silver gloved hand grabs his shoulder.

He's turned around. There's a red glint in Yui's eyes. If anything, she's resembling her daughters at this point, and he can, for a moment, wonder where the craziness in those girls comes from- Lilith, or their other mother. But just as he opens his mouth to ask her what she's doing, she is on him, grabbing him by the head and jamming her tongue down his throat.

It's the Anti-AT Field, he knows on an instinctual level. The field Kyoko told him about, that lowers the inhibitions, that lowers those mental barriers. They're currently smack dab in the middle of it, and for lack of a better term in heat. But he's returning the kiss as hard as she's giving it, her hands tearing at his uniform jacket as he's grabbing her by the head.

But then it hits him. The name keeps repeating in his head. Kyoko told him about this. Kyoko told him about the effects. *Kyoko told him-* and his eyes snap open and he pulls back, pulling her off him, holding her at arms length as he catches his breath. He can't do this. He can't do this a *second time.*

"Yui," he breathes, "Get a hold of yourself. Calm down. It's just the field."

She struggles. For a moment, he thanks whatever hand's guiding this that she doesn't have a suit with an exo-skeleton like Asuka does. He holds her by the wrists, holding her at arms length, keeping his eyes glued to the ceiling. That part of his brain is telling him to do this, telling him he *wants to* but he keeps telling himself *no.*

And a kick to his knee makes him release her wrists, a palm to his chest pushing him to the ground, and she's pinning him, a wide smile on her face, her hands pinning his wrists to the metal floor. Her face is inches from him, and the plugsuit feels like a second skin against him.

"You know," she slurs, "I'm kinda jealous of Kyoko."

"It's just Lilith, Yui," he says, "You don't want to do this-"

"She doesn't even tone down the bitchiness, and first thing you do is get back in bed with her," she says, her speech slurred, her eyes unfocused, "But you and me get a room in Vegas, and the best thing you can do is pay for dinner? Where's the justice in that? Least you could've done was cop a feel."

She smiles, a drunken, sloppy smile. Pinned to the ground, he takes in her words, mouthing that last part.

"Yui," he says, "Yui, I honestly wouldn't have done that. I don't-"

"I've wanted to *f_* your brains out for *so long,*" she half moans, half giggles, "No time like the present."

He figures she'll forgive him for it later when they get out of here. Desperate times, after all, call for desperate measures. And no matter what the raging stiffie her rubbing against him is saying, no matter how he really, really, *really* wants to just give *in*, right now, he overrides them. He focuses on that one image, deeply buried in the back of his mind. That one memory he never thought about for all those years.

And he brings his knee up into Yui's gut, forcing the wind out of her before pushing her off. Scrambling to his feet, he stumbles towards the Gate. He doesn't have the codes to unlock Heaven's Door. No, he doesn't have those, yet. But he keeps himself focused, his mind a knife's edge, walking to the wall, feeling for seems and depressions like Katsuragi told him about.

Her plug suited arm wraps around his neck. Her legs wrap around his waist, pulling him back, trying to pull him down. Grabbing her forearm, he jams his chin underneath it before pitching forward, grabbing her arm and flipping her onto her back.

The panel releases, and Pieter grabs the hose as she scrambles to her feet. Twisting it to open, he kicks the release, and Yui gets a face full of cold water that sends her flying a good ten feet. Dropping the hose, he turns off the pressure and turns back to the door.

He hears her stumbling over. That calmed down Asuka and Shinji when Misato had to do that to them, so it should do the same to her. They were teenagers, after all, and there's no way Yui's got more hormones running through her than they do.

"Okay, if you're calmed down," he says, "I'm going to guess you have the access codes for Heaven's Gate."

She laughs. He turns to her as she leans against the wall, walking towards him with a wide smile on her face. Her hair is soaked and droplets are formed on her plugsuit, and she sways slightly before lunging at him. She catches him on the stomach, slamming her knee into it before tripping him, slamming him against the floor and straddling him.

"Okay," she slurs, "I can open the door. I'll wrestle you for the codes."

She sits up. Pulling the zipper down the front, she wears a lopsided smile as she begins opening the front of her plugsuit, Pieter's heartbeat beating in between his ears as he watches, more intent than he should. She pins him with a hand to his chest, pulling the zipper down to her navel, licking her lips.

"Kei would be disappointed," he says.

"So she can join the club," Yui slurs, her gaze hardening for a moment, "I turn one of my kids into a f_ing death trap with a six-year old's mind, my own *son* probably thinks I'm a monster, and I just watched the one of my girls who actually *admires* me get punched through a

wall by little mes I thought were made to end my life."

She shimmies, baring a bit of her shoulder. Her drunken swaying lays in contrast to the hardening expression on her face and the good crying jag playing on her face as she dances her hand on Pieter's chest.

"I've *f_ed* everything else I cared about today. Why won't you let me f_ you too?"

The tears start running down her cheeks, and her shoulders shake, and she runs her hand over her face as she lets off a miserable choking sound. She falls off of him, sitting on the metal floor, running her fingers through her hair as she seems to curl up on herself.

He stands, shakily, his face bright red. He can see a good amount of skin when she sits, and the same words keep ringing in his ears, telling him to make **babies** and dear *God* he wants to, but he keeps focusing on the image, keeps focusing on the image, and sits down next to her.

"I...I can't open the door," she says, grabbing her zipper, pulling it back up, "Head's swimming, can't...what did we almost do?"

"I'm calling this the whumpa room," he sighs, running his hands through his hair, "I'm just trying to focus."

She nods. She shakes as she nods, hands intertwined, her fingers pulling against each other as she takes shaky breaths. There is desperation on her face. Real pain, he notices. His hand reaches out, taking hers, and he sits next to her in silence.

...

The first blast sent Hatchi flying through the wall of the Reiquarium, out through Sheol and into the Graveyard, landing in a pile of discarded Evangelion spines. The second blast was a distraction so Kei could blind them with a flash of light and then launch into an attack on Siyon, numbing her arm, her right arm, with a nerve strike before she leapt into a duct to escape.

Scrambling through the ductwork, she swears to herself in gibberish. That son of a bitch. *That son of a bitch.* She should have known there would be a price for her telling him off-

And then the duct collapses. AT Fields shred it on either side. Shouting, Kei drops from it, landing in a crouch, and the five of them surround her.

Rei is in the lead. Siyon, Nana, Iti, and Hatchi are with her. All of them, arrayed against her, just like he planned. If she gets out of this, Kei muses, she's going to have to *murder* him.

"Kei," Rei says, curling her hands into fists, "We're gonna have to take you down. 'Kay?"

"Try it," Kei says, wiping the blood from her lip with her sleeve, "Let's go."

Rei charges, her AT Field wrapping around her fist, aimed directly at her sister's face.

And then a foot slams into Rei's face, stunning her before the second kick sends her flying back, catching Nana with her as the two bounce off the floor a distance away.

And Kei stands, mouth open in shock. She wasn't the one who did that. She wasn't it at all. Instead, the girl, her mirror image, in the pink and green plugsuit cracks her knuckles and scowls. Which is a very rare sight for her.

"Kiko?" Kei asks.

"You dropped your phone," Kiko says, "Someone hasn't been very ni~ice."

She takes out the cell phone, handing it back to Kei as the girls collect themselves, still staring. And Kei barely moves when Kiko slaps her across the face.

"How could you?" she asks.

The girl is silent for a long moment. Her hand clenches, the cell phone screen flashing and dying.

"I don't know," Kei responds, "I just don't know."

The cell phone shatters as she clenches her fist, a slow growl escaping her throat.

"All I know," she says, "Is that when I started it...I *enjoyed* it."

The oversized fist slams into the AT Field, shattering the first three layers, more and more appearing with every second as a virtual wall of force and light issues forth from Zeruel's mouth. Pushing Go-kun back, leaving clawed grooves in the ground outside the city, Go-kun does not budge. Blasts of plasma and missile volleys fire from his shoulders, the air around the Angel flashing as the field becomes a solid sphere.

Go-kun's fist hits the field with the sound of a ringing bell. The field shatters with the sound of shattering glass, blue blood spurting from between Go-kun's armored knuckles as he slams his drill through the remaining three fields, leaping through it and slamming his forehead into Zeruel's face.

A spin and two of the feet slam into the Angel, forcing it back. Blasts of plasma lance from Go-kun's shoulder pylons, burning exposed black flesh. A tendril shoots out from the Angel of might, catching Go-kun in mid lunge and severing a leg at the knee, blue blood staining the ground below.

Grunting, the Evangelion spins his lower torso into a tripod configuration. The pylons expand out, opening and flowering out as they angle forward. Light gathers within them, the frost on the Evangelion's mask evaporating under the head as he braces his back leg and fires. The blasts shatter the AT Field around Zeruel and strike him dead center, making the Angel scream in pain, the psychic shout rippling through Tokyo-3.

And then the AT Fields layer above Go-kun and slam down. He brings up his hand, catching it, blue blood spraying out from between the knuckles, his S2 engine glowing brighter and brighter as he calls upon more and more power to hold it up.

And tendrils expand out, the Angel rising above, its face pointed downward at the Evangelion as the light gathers in its eyes. In Central Dogma, they cover their eyes, the blast taking up the entirety of the Big Screen for seconds. Maya screams from the brightness and the roar, and as they light clears, they turn back to it. Where Go-kun was standing, there is now a hole several times his size. Ground and soil leak into the hole, the edges of it glassed. The remains of one of his legs lies smoking at the edge.

"Status," Misato says.

"Go-kun's been found," Makoto says, "Ma'am, his transponder's coming from inside the Geo-front and he's offline...that blast just punched all the way through all the armor layers."

...

Pneumatic compressors release, shoving the white metal cylinder into the opening in the back of the red Evangelion's neck. Crossing her fingers, Kyoko watches, and curses herself as the Eva once more pushes the Entry Plug out.

"Damn it," she whispers, "Zwei, why are you *doing* this?"

"*Plug isn't in position, Doctor. Unit-02 can't activate."*

"I can see that," she says, tapping at the console in the Prinbow box, "Uri, we're starting again from Step 602. Standby."

She slams her fist against the console, grinding her teeth. Of all the times for Zwei to become temperamental, but she understands. She programmed Zwei to be simplistic, faithful, and as much like a guard dog as anything. And now that Uri has been...changed...by his experience in Raziel, what was once a grudging acceptance of him as become outright rejection because Zwei cannot understand that even if Uri is now an Angel- something she is not sure of herself, he is still Uri.

"*Mother.*"

"Yes, Uri?" she asks.

"*Where is Asuka? Perhaps we should try putting her into the Entry Plug."*

Kyoko grinds her teeth. She can feel one crack, but ignores the pain. Of course, now of all times they have managed to put pride behind them, but now is a time where that does little else but ensure they'll die without people hating them.

"I sent her down to Section 2 to find Kirishima," Kyoko says, "I don't know where she is. I'm sorry, Uri, but you're the only one we have."

Silence from his end. Long silence, as both consider the terrible thing before them, the terrible price of their years. And then the Entry Plug

slides back into Unit-02, and the armor clamps shut behind it.

"Uri, what did you just do?" Kyoko asks.

"*I'm forcing the issue. Sorry, Mother, but I'm overriding your controls. As it turns out, Nagisa actually outranks you when it comes to administrative privileges and he leaves his passcodes out for everyone to find."*

The Prinbow box controls turn dark, as Zwei's eyes light up and he begins struggling, shifting in place. And the connection cuts out just as Kyoko starts screaming.

...

"Okay," Uri says, slowly breathing as the plug rocks back and forth, "I think we need to talk."

"ANGEL!"

Inside the plug, the voice, vibrations from the core, are even louder. Each shout from Zwei ripples through the LCL, like standing in front of a concert loudspeaker. He shudders, shrinks at the voice, grinding his teeth.

And Eva will not accept him if he does not open to it.

Is that it? Is that what he has to do?

His synch level has always been shit. Ikari nearly outdid his synchronization level the first time he even entered Eva, but there were reasons. Ichi wanted him to pilot, it was built by his mother, but most importantly...

Most importantly, Ikari was never raised so single-mindedly. Never closed off to the world like he is.

"If I open myself to Eva, it will accept me," he says, softly. His voice is softer than he can remember it. The pride drains out of him like a physical thing.

"It's not about pride anymore," he says, "It's not about being the best. Zwei, I don't...I don't *care* about being the best anymore, or being the greatest pilot. Please, listen to me-"

"**ANGEL!**"

"I am," he says, "I am one. I know that. But that doesn't matter. Please, Zwei, listen to me. Listen to me, please. And I will listen to you."

He closes his eyes and grips the buttefly controls. Taking a deep breath, he does something he has never done before, out of desperation. He opens his mind, opens his heart. His entire life plays before his eyes, and he lets the barriers down, letting Zwei see everything. Every moment, every shame, every embarrassment. His shock at discovering his origins.

His finding a real reason to fight, to pilot.

The last words he had with Annette before she left for Okayama, that last hug.

The time in Berlin.

Fighting alongside Kaworu. Connecting with people for the first time.

The plug is silent. The LCL is still and the Core does not shake with rage like it was. Instead, everything is silent and still, and Uri waits. Slowly, he lets out the breath he was holding, closing his eyes as he lets Zwei decide.

...

Through the punctured hole in the roof of the Geofront, the Angel descends, black tendrils flapping through the air as it descends towards NERV-1. A flash of light and a lance of red crosses the distance, ripping into the side of the pyramid, reducing metal to vapor as it exposes the great metal shaft beneath.

"The Angel's entered the Geofront," Makoto says, voice calm and steady despite the creeping fear in his voice, "Main shaft is exposed."

"Is it coming here?" Misato asks, "Well, crap. All non-combat personnel, evacuate!"

Alarms begin blaring through the base, voices in several languages ordering evacuation. At the desk on high, Gendo continues staring at the screen. Something is wrong, he thinks. Something is very wrong. The Angel has entered the main shaft of the base, descending downwards. Surely it knows about the alarms and the safeties. Surely it knows that if it enters Terminal Dogma, the standby systems will

detonate the entire Geofront and kill it, as well.

"Katsuragi," he says, "Status of the Third Child."

The big screen shifts. A smaller screen pops out, showing Shinji, in his hospital gown, but not in the infirmary. Instead, he is standing in the vehicle hangar on the other side of the base from Central Dogma.

...

He can hear it. He can hear it coming. The metal beneath him vibrates, and he can sense it. He knows it has defeated Go-kun, knows that there's nothing in the base that can stop it. But this is it, isn't it, he thinks. This is all he can do, resting his hands on the railings as the base shakes and alarms blare.

And then the wall on the other side of the hangar, facing him, rips apart as the black tendrils tear metal and rip a hole big enough for the metal grimace to peek through before tearing the wall itself asunder. Resting on the tendrils, the Angel of Might enters the hangar, gaze intent on Shinji.

IKARI.

The voice echoes through his body, through his soul. Resting on the black tendrils, the skull like metal grimace levels upon him.

THIS IS NOT YOUR TRUE FACE.

The Angels do not understand technology, Shinji remembers. So it does not know he and Unit-01 are different things. But it came for him, and it still came for him. And it bypassed Central Dogma, so they're still alive.

"What...what do you want?" he asks, slowly, voice cracked, warmth running down his leg.

YOU ARE THE ONE WHO IS TO FACE ME. BUT THIS IS NOT YOUR TRUE FACE.

The Angel stares at him. Deep in the recesses of his skull, deep in the black canyons that are its eyes, it makes a sound. The sound is one of terrible power, a great and mighty moan that vibrates the floor beneath him and makes the vehicles in the hangar shudder as the

Angel leans downward.

BUT THEN IT IS NO MATTER.

The light flashes in the eyes. Shinji stands stock still, transfixed by it, as the glow deep within its sockets flashes, becoming brighter and brighter.

THIS WAR ENDS NOW.

And the light becomes brighter, as Shinji clenches his eyes shut and readies himself for the end, as the Angel moans in expected triumph.

And then the wall opposite the Angel explodes outwards and a red and white fist slams into Zeruel's face. Shinji looks up. Four eyes are glowing, as the massive form of Unit-02 overshadows him before it slams shoulder first into the Angel.

"Zwei?" Shinji asks.

A roar, almost animalistic but still human, blasts over Zwei's loud speakers. For a moment, Shinji is disappointed it wasn't Asuka who saved him. Then, he realizes who it was who just saved his ass.

"*URI?"*

...

Roaring, Uri urges Zwei forward, tackling the Angel, carrying them both to the ground before Zwei slams his fists into the Angel's face. His own AT Field resonating with Zwei's, the two together have pried the Angel's open, exposing the Angel itself for the beating it has so rightly earned.

"Don't let up!" he screams, "Don't let it recover! Take out its face first!"

Zwei obeys. The fist slams into the Angel's face, causing the blast that could have severed Zwei's arm to go wild, painting fire across the ceiling. Zwei barks victoriously, again repeating the word it has for Uri, the new one, the right one.

"**BROTHER."**

The AT Field of the Angel pulses, tossing Zwei back. The Eva lands in a crouch before charging, throwing up its own field, deflecting the lancing tendrils and ramming him head on, carrying them both across the hangar and through Cage 3, then Cage 2. He needs to get this bastard out of the base, he thinks. And he just figured out how.

"Dogma, come in! This is Unit-02!"

Misato's dumbstruck face appears in his right eye.

"*Uri, how in the Hell-*"

"I'll explain later! Power up the rails!"

Zwei carries the Angel, body checking it into the wall. Only, as the Angel realizes, it is not just a wall, but a series of rails leading up the side of the base, nearly two miles, and back into the Geofront itself.

"Excuse me," Uri says with a grin, "But it's stuffy in here. Let's get some air."

And Zwei slams its foot into the release controls at the Angel's side before the cradle sends them both launching at supersonic speeds into the Geofront itself, Zwei grinding the Angel's face against the railing the entire way.

...

"I can see. I see, now. You were all quick to believe that I was a monster. Weren't you?"

The air ripples in time with her heartbeat, a side effect of her AT Field pushing them away. Her eyes glow, and with a swift motion of her outstretched hand, she sends them flying.

"Fine, then," Kei whispers, "I'll be your monster."

...

The entire hangar shakes. Yelling, Shinji falls onto his back, looking up as the overhead struts bend from the force of the impacts, watching as Zwei and the Angel are shot up to the surface. And then several of the struts break, falling, with one dropping straight towards him.

A flash of light, and the strut deflects off of an AT Field, the octagonal pattern of gold light flashing before dispersing. He knows he didn't do that. A pained gasp and he knows it wasn't him, rolling onto his belly and looking up. The girl with blue hair and red eyes smiles, faintly, before collapsing to her knees.

He crawls over, her arms wrapped around herself, the dark plue piping of her black and white plugsuit flashing, glowing iridescent.

"Zyuu?" he asks.

"It doesn't hurt like Kiko said," Zyuu gasps, her eyes glowing, "Still hurts..."

Another pained gasp, the metal underneath her warping, shaking. He pulls himself to his hands and knees, reaching for her. And then two bone white protrusions burst from her shoulders as she screams, framing themselves in orange light resembling wings.

Her fingers dig into the metal as she screams, feathered wings shredding the sleeves of her plugsuit as they extend from her forearms, her eyes glowing solid red as the catwalk starts to sheer. Her eyes roll up and she pitches forward, the supports underneath them groaning in protest as the entire platform begins to list.

He doesn't know what causes it. He doesn't know what makes him move. But his bare feet slam against the metal, and his knees pump, sending him upward, grabbing his sister by the waist and carrying them both off the platform as it falls, landing in a heap at the hangar entrance.

The wings have retracted, the bone protrusions having crawls back into her shoulders, dripping blood on the metal and shedding feathers, and her eyes are closed and breathing shallow. Quickly, desperately, he probes her neck with his fingers, finding a pulse but weak.

"Zyuu," he whispers, slapping her on the cheek, "C'mon. C'mon. Wake up."

Her breathing is slow, unsteady. Her body shudders with every breath and the lines on her plugsuit have started glowing deep red, which he knows is just not good.

"No," he whispers, "No no *no* damn it!"

A sharp breath, another light slap to her cheek.

"C'mon," he whispers, his voice shaking, cracking, "C'mon. Please."

Grinding his teeth, he shakes her, hard, her breathing erratic and pained. And then the hypo hits her neck and her breathing slows.

"Sedative," Kyoko says, "We need to submerge her in LCL. Follow me."

...

The plate doesn't make it in time. Which is all for the best, as Zeruel slams face first into it, ripping it off its moorings as it and Zwei are tossed into the air, Zwei punching the Angel in the face the entire ride down.

Straddling the beast, the Evangelion slams massive fists down, denting the metal of the face, thrusting its palms as the two AT Fields of the pilot and Eva converge and crater the ground beneath them, flattening the tendrils against the earth.

Grabbing at the tendrils, Unit-02 pulls them back, exposing the beating red core before bringing its foot down on it, slamming its fist against it as it holds the black mass overhead. The timer is still chiming at 3:00, Uri's eyes glowing in time with Zwei's own.

A blast of light issues from the Angel's eyes, sheering off the horn on Zwei's helm and making Uri scream before two tendrils wrap around Zwei's head, throwing Zwei off of Zeruel and slamming him into the roof of the Geofront before slamming him back against the ground. Dirt, debris, and cement rain down as Zwei's AT Field forms into a dome, the raining projectiles bouncing off.

A burst of energy from the knees, kicking up metric tons of dirt, and Zwei charges. Ducking under the lancing tendril, Zwei grabs it, spraying blue blood from its cut palm as it stops it in its tracks, Uri yelling out in the plug as the progressive knife deploys and Zwei severs the tendril with a stroke. Growling underneath his mask, the Angel sends four more flying, catching the Eva in the shoulders and lifting it up, breaking off both jet strips as Zwei howls in pain.

The Angel rises, dragging itself back up, stabbing its tendrils into the ground before letting off a moan. It takes the form of several AT Fields, lined up and expanding from its mouth before slamming into Zwei, pinning the Eva to the side of the mountain behind it as the Angel slowly hovers forward.

Slowly, its mind unfurls, connecting with the Eva, connecting with Uri, who holds his shoulders and coughs blue blood. He sees the pain the Angel intends. He sees the length of the slow evisceration.

And then another metal plate slides open, and another giant rises. Zeruel pauses, turns, sensing the familiarity. And that is all the new arrival needs to blast the Angel of Might in the face and send him flying.

...

"What the Hell?" Misato yells, as the orange giant steps off the platform, "Is that Unit *00*?"

Screens next to the Big Screen fold out, showing the diagrams and cross sections of the rebuilt Evangelion as it marches forward, slowly, deliberately, as its single optic flashes violet.

"Confirmed," Maya announces, eyes on her screen, "It is Unit-00! But we never re-installed its Core."

"Core activity's detected, but not inside the Eva," Makoto yells, "Zooming in..."

The screen zooms in, a square locking onto the shoulder and stretching to fill the entire screen. A chair hits the floor, and they turn to see Gendo already standing, eyes wide underneath his sunglasses and staring at the screen. They soon follow. Because on the screen is a sixteen year old girl with glasses and in a pink and green plugsuit, one hand holding onto Unit-00's shoulder pylon, and a wicked grin on her face.

...

TRAITOR.

The booming voice of Zeruel thunders in her mind, and she sucks the blood back up from her nose with a grin. She wills the Eva forward, as Junior told her to, her own Core becoming that of the Evangelion, quickening it to life and as an extension of herself. Another thought, her AT Field covering the Evangelion in crystal armor as the walk becomes a run.

"Yeah, well," Mari Illustrious Makinami says, "Sucks to be you."

The Angel of Might rises. Its black tendrils singed, its eyes glowing.

YOU HAVE TURNED AGAINST YOUR KIN. THERE WILL BE NO MERCY.

The Eva charges. Mari's grin grows only wider.

"News flash, honey," she says, "I have most of Ramiel's memories. And you've always been a *sore loser*."

The eyes of Zeruel flash, lancing out into a beam. Unit-00 responds in kind, the two beams of unthinkable force meeting at the center of the Geofront. And grinning at his rescue, Uri urges Zwei up, grabbing a discarded shoulder pylon and extracting the progressive knife from within.

"Let's go!"

...

The lift speeds down, floors passing them in a blur. Tapping the controls on her wrist, the blue lines of the joints glow, and the helmet retracts to reveal her face. Mana watches as Asuka continues tapping on her PDA, leaning on her crutch. The bruises are almost gone, Mana notices. Maybe she's been too wrapped up about Vegas to really tell. Maybe she should finish her report, someday.

"What happened, over in America?" Asuka asks.

"I'll tell you later," Mana says, and the helmet closes, the faceplate turning transparent, "Okay, SUIT's ready. Glad I lifted this from Spencer's prototyping plant when I could. What've you got?"

The lift doors open. Asuka walks out, Mana's metal boots stomping behind her as they enter the massive, dimly lit hangar. Passing large hanging objects that resemble spines, Mana suppresses a shudder as they walk, the catwalks creaking.

"This is the l-lower Hangar," Asuka explains, "The Ree t-tend to use it. They wiped the location from the MAGI. I've been helping them for the last week with a project."

The main light turns on as they come to a stop at one of the bays.

Mana looks up. And whistles.

"Oh yeah. That'll work."

Chapter 70: Ashes, Ashes

"You know, from this angle, it really looks like Lilith's getting ready to give birth."

Sitting on a piece of debris left from what was the automated battleship that patrolled the great chamber of Lilith, Yui stares at the Great Mother. He is right. Lilith's legs are spread in the position she's nailed at, the Lance stuck into her neck.

"You're right," she says, "It is kind of perverted. Then again, so is Lilith, when you look at it."

"Giant progenitor that wants babies," Pieter sighs, "And that makes you want to...um...with anyone in range. Yeah, it is."

They both sigh.

"What made you resist?" Yui asks.

A small, sad smile crosses his face.

"A memory," he says, "Kyoko, screaming at me. Cursing at me. Telling me to never speak to her again, after she found out about me and Claire. I didn't want to do that, a second time. I'm tired of screwing up."

He goes silent for a bit. They both do, staring at the spread eagle mother of life.

"So, you're attracted to me?" he asks.

She sighs.

"Somewhat," she responds, "Don't get any ideas. But I do think you make nice eye candy for the offices."

He chuckles, a small grin cracking his features. Hands folded in his lap, they sit in a comfortable silence for a while longer.

"You know, if it helps, I have to admit the feeling's mutual," he says, "Of course, I'd never act on it. You're a good friend."

"And married."

"I'm pretty sure that's part of it, to," Pieter responds with a grin.

They sit in silence, still staring at the restrained god thing. Moment pass, and he squeezes her shoulder with a grunt. A smile passes between them, and nothing is said. Nothing needs to be said.

And they watch as the LCL laps the metal shore, waiting in comfortable silence.

Chapter 70: Ashes, Ashes

The blasts meet, tossing up dirt and trees, ripping the foundations beneath them as the Angel of Might and the reborn Thunder of God struggle. Unit-00 crystal armor glimmers with dew and particulate matter, shifting like the waves of a calm sea, as on its shoulder, Mari Illustrious Makinami directs her new chariot forward. She feels alive. She loves this feeling.

For a long time, too long, she was doubtful and afraid. She wasn't sure what she was, and that backfire with her mother wasn't helping things either. But now? Now she has no doubt. This is what she is.

This is what she was born to do.

She is the Thunder of God, Angel of Lightning. And she is also Mari Illustrious Makinami, daughter of Pieter Sohryu, once considered backup Eva pilot. And now?

Now she's come to kick Zeruel's *ass.*

...

"Ichi!"

The eyes of Unit-01 glow a faint, dim yellow. Underneath the transparent plating, Shinji can see the orb of the Evangelion's eyes shift, centering on him before the lid closes. The metal plate again closes over the back of the Evangelion's neck as Kyoko walks over, Zyuu's unconscious, bleeding form in her arms.

"Damn it, Ichi!" Shinji screams, "We need to get Zyuu into an entry

plug!"

No response, save the head of the Evangelion shifting slightly away from him. The eyes go dim, the great mecha going silent once more, as it has for the past week.

"Ichi, please," Shinji says, "Zyuu's hurt. We need to get her into a plug and into LCL. None of the other Evas are here. You're the only one who can save her."

Nothing, save the jet of steam from its nasal vents. Shinji almost collapses against the railing, eyes clenched shut. Once again, Ichi's turned him away. Once again, he's failed.

"You spoiled brat," Kyoko seethes. Ichi's eyes flash yellow.

"You heard me," Kyoko says, "I can't believe how many times they've gone to bat for you. One thing happens to you and you completely shut yourself off."

Her lips twist, her face one of distaste, like she just tasted something wretched.

"They're right. You really are a child. You sure act like one."

The orb beneath the armor turns, fixing a green eyes on her.

"You're hurt. You're scared."

Kyoko shrugs.

"I don't care," she says, "To be honest, now that I know about what you are, I'm giving you even less slack. Because right now, in my arms, your half sister is *dying.* And you can save her, if you just get over yourself and stop hiding. You may be Ikari's child. You could be the child of God Himself, but none of that matters for *crap* in my eyes unless you take some responsibility and *listen. To. Your. Brother."*

The plate on the back of Unit-01's neck slides back, one of the overhead waldos sliding the Entry Plug into place, which opens as it fills with LCL. Jaw open, Shinji stares at Unit-01, then turns to Kyoko.

"Sometimes, a child needs to be disciplined," Kyoko says, "I suspect that is not one of your mother's strong suits."

He reaches for Zyuu. She shakes her head.

"I will see this through," Kyoko says, "Go. What I said to Ichi applies to you as well, Ikari. Stop moping. You have a job to do."

She walks past him, walking to the entry plug with the unconscious girl. And Shinji turns, and begins walking towards the outside, breaking into a run before long.

...

The eye of Unit-00 glows once more, another pulse of pink light slamming into Zeruel's AT Field as Zwei vaults over the crushed remains of NERV-1's armored pyramid, slamming a foot into the Angel of Might's face as Uri wills both progressive knives down towards the Core.

Another wall of light comes up, followed by three tendrils shooting at towards Zwei's head. An AT Field blocks one, Zwei grabs the second, and his jaw locks release and he chomps down on the third before yanking back. Zeruel pitches forward as the red Evangelion slams its forward into the Angel's face, receiving a blast from the Angel's eyes for its troubles that sends it flying, severed tendril in his mouth.

Flipping back up, the Eva shakes its head, raining drool down over the Geofront before dodging another another blast before a crystal enclosed fist from Unit-00 strikes Zeruel in the face.

"C'mon, *bitch!"* Mari yells, "Whats'a matter? Don't like it when it ain't a *curbstomp?"*

The air above Unit-00 shimmers, layering in AT Fields. She squeaks, eyes going wide, and Unit-00 darts out of the way before the pillar of energy slams into where she was. A tendril shoots out, taking off the jet strip Mari was holding onto, the girl grabbing onto the orange Evangelion's jaw as she shrieks.

The low moan emitting from Zeruel vibrates. In her Overmind, Mari knows that son of a bitch is laughing.

"**Excuse me. I don't think we're done yet."**

Zeruel turns. Zwei's jet strips glow green as he extends his AT Field, slamming into the Angel's own. And a blast of plasma strikes Zeruel right in the face.

The Angel stumbles back, flakes of itself dropping as it turns its attention towards the green and red Evangelion. Leaking blue across the Geofront, dragging itself by his remaining arm, Go-kun's single eye flickers intermediately as he fires another blast from his shoulder cannons.

...

And deep underground, Shinji presses the two buttons on either side of his wrist. The plugsuit depressurizes, conforming to his body. It feels lighter. Not that it was ever heavy in the first place, but now he's feeling it. He's feeling the change that his time in the Core did to him.

"Misato," he says.

The video image unfolds in his right eye, Misato's face appearing. Her expression is one of shock, although the open mouth has the hints of a smile on it.

"*Shinji? Where are you?"*

"I'm heading due east from the Cages," he says, "Ichi's out of action right now. Misato, the Angel's interested in me. I'm going to lure it."

He can see Misato tapping on her PDA, a grin crossing her features as she brings up her map.

"*Belay that, kid. I've got a better idea. You're going to find a corridor about ten meters ahead. Take the right branch."*

"What's there?"

"*At the end of the corridor is the Project E forward dimensional physics control center. You're going to trigger the Dirac Array, and we're going to dump that son of a bitch."*

He nods, a grin appearing on his features. Breaking into a run, the hallway becomes a blur, skidding at a stop seconds later in front of the v-fork. The corridor is wide, wide enough for vehicles, opening into multiple entrance doors leading a good two kilometers down, and ending in doors large enough for Eva scale weaponry. Thankfully, it's empty; since ADAM was dumped into the Dirac, NERV has been nervous to say the least of accessing the Dirac armory. Running down the right, he can hear the sounds of battle above, regretting not being

there, not in the thick of it. But, like Sohryu said, he has a job to do.

IKARI.

Something slams into the wide corridor in front of him. Three black shards slamming into the metal floor.

Shinji skids to a halt, pulverized soil and concrete dancing in the air.

The first one rises, on pale white muscular legs ending in toeless feet, tendrils of black draped over its eight foot tall form. The other two rise, identical to the first, the tendrils wrapping around themselves at their sides to form arms ending in bladed, two fingered hands.

Three identical faces, metal grimaces resembling skulls, stare back at Shinji with mute expressions, staring at him, examining him, taking his measure. And as one, their eyes glow red.

TEAR HIM APART.

And Shinji ducks behind a VTOL just as all three of the Zerulim open fire with their eye beams.

...

The other Ree drop to the ground, the dome of light surrounding Kei canceling out. Their means of motive support, that was canceling out gravity for them, having disappeared, the girls drop, hitting metal floor, surrounded by the stench of the old discarded Evangelion parts, the sound of whirring waldos moving pieces to different parts of the massive facility...

And a high pitched, choked sob as Kei falls to her knees.

She wraps her arms around herself, tears already running down her cheeks. She thought she was ready. She thought she was able to strike out against her sisters, to become the monster that they suspected her of being. Instead, this just confirms what she has long suspected, as her shoulders and chest hitches and her vision blurs.

She really *sucks* at being evil.

"Hey," Kiko says, wrapping her arms around Kei, pulling her into a hug as Kei's lip quivers, "It's okaaa~ay. I didn't think you were going all evil and stuff, 'kay?"

She pulls Kei to her feet, lightly tapping her on the cheek with a smile, snot and tears running down Kei's face as she averts her touchy feely sister's gaze.

"Yeah, we always kinda thought you were angry," Nana says, squeezing Kei's shoulder, "We just didn't think you were, you know, *that* angry."

"You'd be surprised," Kei sniffles, wiping her eyes with her shirt sleeve, "Damn it. Damn *it*."

The entire room shakes. Their eyes glow, minds touching, touching the gestalt Overmind of Big Mommy at the same time.

"Zyuu," Kei says, "Zyuu's in trouble. And Mom is down in Terminal Dogma."

"Sounds like we got ourselves a job to do," Rei says, grabbing Kei by the arm, "'Kay, so there's a *biiiiig* Angel up top, so Kei and me're going to make it our special friend. Ready?"

Kei nods. The other Ree are already gone, banging through the ductwork down into Terminal Dogma. And the sisters' eyes glow, before with a thrust of their AT Fields they ascend.

...

The bladed tendrils carves off the cockpit of the VTOL. Sparks fly, smoke wafts up, and the Zerulim carve up his cover as Shinji cowers. He has to run away, he has to get out of here. Crawling on his hands and knees, he skitters under the next VTOL as the Zerulim finish carving it up, breathing heavy, eyes clenched shut.

He has to *run away. He has to run away. He has to-*

You said you were not going to run away.

The same flat, unemotional voice he remembers during the fever dream. The Rei who was not Rei. The Rei who was sent by Lilith when he spent the week unconscious. Closing his eyes, he sees her, again. He feels pity, like he did for ADAM for some reason. Why?

If you run away, they will chase you. Their intent is to kill you. They will kill any between them and you.

Then what do I do, he asks himself, Offer myself up to die?

Do you believe you can do that? Was that what you intended when you lured Zeruel away from the others? Do you think that is all you can do?

His fingers curl into fists, knuckles cracking. No, he thinks, No, it isn't. He opens his eyes as the footsteps stomp closer and closer. He has been running away since he awoke. He has closed in on himself since he drove away Ichi, since he failed during the fight with Raziel.

Stop moping, Sohryu said, *You have a job to do.*

"I will not run away."

The Zerulim stop. One of the VTOLs, the Lilim craft, is rising. But there is no thrust, no force of the engine shunted through vents. Instead, the source of the lift for the lilim battlecraft is coming from the sixteen year old Nephilem standing underneath it, holding it above his head with a strained grimace on his face, his red eyes now glowing.

"Catch," he growls, and hurls it. It crushes one of the Zerulim as it hits, the other two dodging out of the way as the hangar floor paints with yellow ichor. The monsters distracted, Shinji runs, clocking 40 miles an hour, bringing back his fist with a crack of his wrist and slamming his knuckles into the second Zerulim's face, knocking it off its feet before he makes a vertical leap to dodge the flurry of tendrils from the other, as the second Zerulim gets back up.

Landing in a crouch, Shinji grins. It is the first real smile he's had on his face since he woke up. He cracks his knuckles, craning his neck with an audible pop.

"Let's go."

One lances out a beam of red from its eyes, the other sending two tendrils slicing through the air. Shinji ducks under, diving, sliding across the floor and leaping at the slashing Zerulim before slamming his fist into its face. The black mass around it liquifies and slashes out, wrapping around Shinji and holding him fast before the young nephilem headbutts the monster hard enough to crack the face.

A pulse of its eyes and Shinji is sent flying back, slamming into the far wall and dropping down. He groans, spitting up blood, stumbling to his feet as the two Zerulim advance. Kicking off the wall, he tackles

one, grabbing it in a headlock and twisting around it as the second fires, the impact and blast wave throwing Shinji off the now smoking Zerulim and bouncing him off the floor.

The remaining Zerulim advances, steady and quick, jaw open and emitting a terrible, animalistic moan as it turns its arms into spiraling tendrils...

And then a blue alpine Renault slams into it and sends it bouncing across the hangar.

...

The ball lights up, light filtering through the blue tinted goo she sits in. The entire ball is similar to her last ride's, which makes her feel only more at ease as her hands rest on the spheres, thoughts drifting, meeting those of the machine itself.

"Hey, Asuka? Didn't the Ree need to, you know, break reality to get this thing working?"

Asuka's face appears on the screen, still typing in control schemes at the console in front of the massive machine.

"*The Ree had to combine their AT Fields to get it moving and to attack the Angel with it. But since Zwei and Mari are already up there, you don't need to get through the Angel's field."*

"Okay...how am I making an AT Field, then?"

Asuka sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. Mana would point out that this makes Asuka look kind of like her mother, but Mana likes the girl, so she doesn't.

"*I've installed a Core into the frame. We actually found out that she was transferring herself into a Solenoid Core we had blanked from the spares, so-"*

"Wait, who transferred into what?"

The core beneath the cockpit shudders. The lights flicker on, and Mana feels the pulling sensation on her, her mind joining with the presence now driving this machine. And she smiles.

"Well, damn. Ready, girl?"

The familiar voice answers.

"*Biolink established. Meta Encapsulated Granule Awareness System: ONLINE. Full systems start."*

"*Synchronization's at 60%,"* Asuka says, "*Reetron, LAUNCH!"*

...

The dented, wrecked door falls off the car, and a young man Shinji's age with messy blonde hair peaks out. The Zerulim is laying unmoving on the floor, and the young man scratches his head before turning to Shinji and running over, helping him up.

"Hey," he says, "Adam Mondschein. I don't think we've met."

Shinji stands, nodding, the two staring at the caved in front of the blue car.

"Katsuragi's going to be pissed," Adam sighs.

"I think she still had ten payments left."

The two nod, sucking in air through their teeth, before Shinji turns to the far end of the hangar and the double doors beyond.

"Come on," he says, "We have to get to the Dirac controls."

"Right behind ya."

The two begin running, the still smoking wreck of Misato's car and the unmoving Zerulim left where they fell. Although, they get not five steps before the remaining Zerulim moves, rising like a marionette on strings.

...

And above, in the Geofront proper, Zeruel forms his AT Field into a great sphere, tossing both Zwei and Unit-00 away, pushing back Go-kun as he tries to aim his remaining plasma cannon.

And the eyes of the Angel of Might begin to glow a baleful red.

...

The Zerulim shudders. His skull like face distorts and distends, jaw open in a cry of soundless pain as the skin covers itself in a silver sheen. It rises, its limbs unraveling, spraying yellow ichor over the floor as what was a humanoid form becomes a mass of tendrils and red.

"This is bad?" Adam asks.

"This is *very* bad," Shinji responds.

The face snaps out, fixed into a permanent rictus grimace. The eyes glow a bright red, as a sphere of red appears at the center of what was its chest. And in the back of Shinji's mind, he hears the demonic, terrible voice.

I AM ASSUMING DIRECT CONTROL.

The eyes flash. Shinji grabs Adam and tosses them both out of the way as the blast lances out and blasts open the double doors on the far side.

"RUN!" Shinji yells, and grabs Adam, as they both race towards the door, with Zeruel's avatar in pursuit. They make it halfway before slamming into the orange wall that appears in front of them, both of them bouncing off and rolling on the ground. Shinji looks up, squeaks, and rolls out of the way as the tendril slices into the ground, Adam dodging a slice of the tendrils as well before one wraps around his ankles and lifts him up with a yell.

"*Shinji, we're reading a second blue pattern at your location!"*

"A little busy, Misato!"

The Angel roars as Adam depresses the stun gun on the tendril, dropping him as he rolls with the impact, Shinji running underneath Zeruel's avatar and towards Misato's wrecked car. He lets the Angel chase, diving and grabbing onto one of the wheels before tearing it free with a yank and hitting the Angel in the face with it.

To his credit, it's momentarily stunned.

Momentarily.

It is the blast from the parked VTOL's main cannon which stuns it for slightly longer, the AT Field blocking their exit flickering as Adam runs out of the VTOL's cockpit, grabbing Shinji by the elbow.

"How the Hell do you know how to fire those?"

"My Dad designed most of your weapons," Adam responds, "Including the stupid ones!"

"Like the ones that can hit the Moon?"

"Exactly!"

The field solidifies in front of them, and the turn just as one tendril wraps around Adam's head, yanking him up as Zeruel centers his attention on Shinji, off handedly tossing Adam aside to impact against one of the parked tanks.

IKARI.

Another AT Field unfolds from its mouth, pinning Shinji against the first. He grunts, pushing against it, finding it unyielding. The face of Zeruel hovers close to his, eyes flickering with awareness, with understanding. With something else. Something familiar.

I WILL ENJOY THIS.

"Enjoy...what?" Shinji grunts.

YOU HAVE BEEN A BLIGHT. YOU ARE THE OBSTACLE TO FINALITY.

"What the...Hell...are you talking about?" he grunts, the pressure increasing, Shinji gritting his teeth to keep from screaming, "What do you...mean...*blight?"*

The eyes flicker and flash, Shinji feeling the heat from them, the expectant blast. Which is right when the vent above them explodes outwards and a new AT Field slams Zeruel against the ground, bouncing him across the hangar. Landing on booted feet, clenching her fists under the gloves of her NERV uniform, Kei narrows glowing eyes as she extends her hand and shatters the AT Field restraining Shinji.

"Are you unhurt?" she asks.

"That's two times you saved my ass," Shinji says with a weak grin,

falling onto his hands and knees, "Kei, I can hear the Angel. It's after me. It's trying to kill me."

"And you lured it away to protect everyone," Kei says.

He nods.

"Good," she says, "Now, let me protect you."

The avatar of the Angel rises, roaring, tendrils scarring the hangar walls.

"You," Kei says, "Will not hurt my brother."

She takes off, denting the metal as a thrust of her legs sends her off in a blur towards Zeruel.

...

Mari's blast shatters the AT Field, as Zwei moves in, two punches to Zeruel's face cracking the metal plating, nearly caving in the metal around one of the eyes before it repairs itself. Two tendrils stab through Zwei's midsection, the Eva howling before following up with a quick jab to the Angel's core.

Inside the hangar, Kei sidesteps the tendril, jumping on it and off of it into a kick to the avatar's face. The Avatar's mouth opens, layers of AT Fields forming into a battering ram, tossing Kei back, forming into a pillar over her. And the pillar disappears as Rei enters through the vent, her eyes glowing before pulling her sister out of the range of an eyeblast.

The lift elevator rises to the surface, and with heavy footsteps, the 600' tall monstrosity comprised of construction equipment with a VTOL for a head advances, swinging its wrecking ball and striking Zeruel directly in the face. Inside the cockpit, Mana whoops, before willing her new chariot into a charge.

The Avatar rises, forming a battering ram of AT Fields, the two Ayanami sisters struggling against it with their own, both falling to their knees, sweat beading at their brow as the angel's minion continues to pour on the power.

And in Central Dogma, the targeting solution forms on the Big Screen.

"Second blue pattern's targeted, ma'am! Hangar defenses armed!"

Misato grins. It is not a pleasant sight.

"Lieutenant Aoba, take that ugly fucker's head off."

At his console, Shigeru Aoba pulls out the joystick from the side of his monitor, flipping open the panel at the top to reveal a large, red button.

"Yes, ma'am. Fox 2."

...

Missile batteries fold out of the ceiling, unsheathing large white payloads before launching. It is only the split second before they hit that Zeruel, Angel of Might, Second to ADAM, realizes the two lilim half breeds before him have managed to match his fully unfurled AT Field. Two of the missiles make it through, slamming into his face, sending metal and meat flying through the hangar as the Avatar collapses onto extended tendrils.

Black flesh knits through the wounds, both girls rising, Shinji running over to his sisters with Adam leaning on his shoulder.

"Rei," he says, "Get Adam to safety. Kei, we have to get to the Dirac control room, now!"

With a nod, Rei grabs Adam by the collar, leaping into the above vent as the boy squeaks in surprise. Kei nods, narrows her eyes, and turns. Grabbing Shinji by the collar, she pushes him back just as the tendril slices through where he was. The Angel's minion rises, face half restored, hissing with anger.

"Go," Kei says, "Go, now."

"Kei-"

"I said go," she says, "Do what you must."

Her eyes glow. A dome appears around her, expanding outward and tossing Shinji down near the doors. She begins walking towards the Angel, calmly sidestepping the tendrils as they lance towards her and slam against the orange dome surrounding them both.

"And, Shinji," she says, "Please. Tell Mother...I'm sorry."

She breaks into a run. The dome vanishes as her eyes flash red, the field slamming now into the Avatar itself. Slammed against the wall, tendrils spread out, Kei allows herself a small, satisfied smile as the light wraps around her hand. Fingers snapped out into a perfect knife hand, she leaps, eyes meeting the Angels' own as she brings her hand back.

This, she thinks, is a good way to go.

As her strike lands on the Avatar's core, Shinji knows to shield his eyes. The flash of light paints the hangar, the roar of sound making his ears bleed as the shockwave hits and throws him off his feet. Metal rends, the floors collapse, and tons of dirt and debris fall into the hole where the avatar and Kei were as Shinji screams her name.

...

And on the Geofront itself, Zeruel's eyes dim momentarily and it reels back as it feels the death of its extension. Weakened, its AT Field falls just as Zwei brings its fists down like red hammers and Go-kun continues firing. A blast from Mari pierces the flesh of the Angel and comes out the other side, his Core showing hairline cracks.

"Push him back!" Uri yells, "Concentrate your AT Fields!"

...

As the smoke clears, Shinji coughs. There is a crater and a wall of dirt and metal where the hangar was. Shakily, he stands, staring at the impromptu grave of his sister. Yelling, he punches the wall, making a dent in it as rock and metal crack off.

"*Shinji! What the Hell happened!"*

He opens his mouth, closing it, trying to find words other than 'Kei's dead.' Falling against the wall, he figures he can explain it later, tapping the send button on his gauntlet.

"I'm here, Misato. What do I do?"

"*The Angel's weakened. Get to the Diac room. We're waiting on you!"*

He nods, turning to the room, walking towards the doors.

IKARI.

He turns as four more black spheres slam through the ceiling. They unfold, four Zerulim standing, hissing and growling towards him. Wisely taking the hint, Shinji turns and runs, the monsters in pursuit.

YOU HAVE CHANGED NOTHING.

Sprinting down the hallway, through the doors, the map comes up in the corner of his left eye, blasts exploding behind him as the creatures make chase.

YOUR SPECIES HAS EARNED THE ATTENTION OF THOSE INFINITELY YOUR GREATER.

Turrets pop out of the walls, heavy cannons coming to bare as Shinji passes by, painting the Zerulim with artillery shells and ripping through black flesh and tendrils as one falls.

THAT WHICH YOU KNOW AS THE ANGELS ARE THE ONLY SALVATION YOUR SPECIES HAS.

Arms and legs pumping, he speeds down the corridor, as the rumbling above becoming a crescendo. Another falls, before a blast misses him, slamming into the hallway floor and ripping it apart. Leaping over, he skids through a turn, seeing the X on the map ahead. Two large doors, past the catwalk ahead and the empty gap bridged over.

Which is right when the blast misses him and tears apart the catwalk. Eyes going wide, the gap easily a good ten meters across, Shinji speeds up and leaps.

Arms stretched out, he reaches for the platform as he sails through the air. Grabbing the mangled remains of the railing, he yells out as he misses the platform itself, hanging on it as the remaining two Zerulim half at the edge, eyes flickering as he grabs onto the platform to pulls himself up. The metal slips under his fingers, holding onto the railing with his other hand as the Zerulim growls flicker, like a laugh.

And then one Zerulim's head explodes, the other turning just as another blast rips out and bisects it, as well. There is an orange glow above his head, a soft whirring that ionized the air in a straight line over him. Shinji looks up as the red gloved hand grabs him, gears whirring as Asuka's plugsuit's exoskeleton compensates and pulls him

up.

"There's a side elevator from the hangar," she says with a smile, "I also learned how to s-set things on fire with my plugsuit."

He returns the smile, pulling her into an embrace and kissing her, before turning to the doors as they open and running in with her.

...

Overhead, over the Geofront itself, the massive frame detaches, lowering itself by the high tensile wires. At the center of it, a single specialized filament begins glowing, flowing with white light as the entire egg shaped mechanism comes to life. The Dirac Array, the specialized device used by NERV to send objects into the Dirac Armory.

Or, in this case, one specialized Angel.

It drops as Zwei slams its fists again and again into Zeruel's face, the walls of AT Fields forcing the Angel back until its back is against the Array itself. And then Go-kun's drill, carried by the Reetron, stabs through the Angel's chest, pinning it.

"Okay!" Mana yells, "Clear the area!"

...

"And tilt it upwards," Shinji yells, "70 degree angle!"

Fingers blurring on the keypads, he and Asuka share a smile as coordinates are punched in, the screens in the half dome room lighting up, displaying the theoretical emptiness of the Dirac Sea. Or, one point in particular.

"*Okay, care to explain why?"*

"Because my plugsuit has coordinate memory," Asuka says, "And we're making sure there's no chance of it coming *out* of the Dirac!"

...

The white filament flashes, a funnel of light and sound crackling inside the array. Struggling against the bonds holding it, Zeruel stops. He feels the presence of the Father. He can feel Him through the Void behind it. The Angel of Might turns its Overmind outward, feeling the presence, readying himself for battle with his Progenitor...and the shadow? Why does it sense the shadow of Father inside-

"*My faith is too strong,"* the cracked voice from within the Void says, "*Burn the heretic."*

NO.

Zeruel turns back inward, tendrils flailing out to free itself. Too late.

Funneled through and focused, the explosion of an infinite number of S2 engines becoming a beam of white light, cutting through the Dirac Array- and Zeruel himself- before burning through the ceiling of the Geofront and outside the borders of Tokyo-3, lancing out into the sky and into space itself.

Zeruel screams. Everything living and dead hears the scream, the silent roar of defiance and agony as the tendrils flail and the light in the eyes of the Angel flicker.

As the Array itself fails and the metal sparks and separates, the Angel is released. It floats forward, the dim red glow in its eyes, its tendrils flailing about the hole in its chest. It advances, he advances, the low growl emitted from his mouth.

And Zeruel, Angel of Might, the Arm of God...

Falls. Collapsing to the ground of the Geofront, the black becomes sickly gray as the light finally leaves his eyes. Silence reigns, broken only by the cheers from Central Dogma. And Mari barely notices the tears already running down her cheeks, before willing Unit-00 back towards the base.

...

Her hand is burning. Her body is sore, and there are definitely broken bones all over, but Kei is not in pain. Or at very least, she is ignoring the pain, in the collapsed bubble of debris around her, where she managed the presence of mind to throw up her AT Field before the explosion could consume her, as well. She is laughing, her voice

hoarse, and crying at the same time.

Laughing because she managed to do it. To actually do this, even when she was so close to breaking down, to giving up and running away.

And crying because they'll still find her, and she'll still have to deal with the distrust, the suspicion. Still have to go back to being in her shadow.

8O.

And then the black sphere phases through the debris around her. She looks up through the eye not swelled shut, as Lilly lowers herself towards Kei.

...go there...

The voice is high pitched, squeaky. Like a child's voice, which Kei figures is appropriate as she passes out. And Lilly expands, forming into a sphere around Kei, and disappears.

...

The Angel of Might awakens. He should be dead, he realizes. He fell in battle. But this is not his body. This is not his form. Gone is the mighty form, gone is the Presence he inspires.

"Greetings, brother."

A presence before him. Above him. The golden red eyes and ash hair, the infuriating smile looking down upon him through the blurry glass.

TABRIS.

"Ah, you are indeed still alive," Kaworu says, "Welcome to my home, Zeruel. It seems we shall be spending more time with each other, especially since you have fallen. I look forward to that."

RELEASE ME, TABRIS. THE LILIM SHALL FALL. I HAVE YET TO BE DEFEATED.

Kaworu smiles, hands folded behind him. Standing in front of the glass cylinder, in which suspened in LCL is the baseball sized fragment of red crystal, he tilts his head.

"Oh, but you have," he says, "You have been defeated, and destroyed. And I have come into possession of the last part of you. Your rampage has done little but provide me with an opening of my own, Zeruel. And you now shall be a part of my plan."

YOUR PLAN WILL NOT SUCCEED, TABRIS! THE LILIM MUST BE DESTROYED-

"No, Zeruel," Kaworu says, eyes glowing, "As you said, you have *failed.* We will find another way."

He taps a button on the console before him, as the cylinder darkens and the metal sheathe surrounds it.

"And I, *brother,* am now assuming control."

Zeruel rages, silenced by a flick of Kaworu's fingers, as he exits the laboratory and ascends the stairs. Walking quickly, with purpose, he allows himself the grin, allows himself his smile. Exiting into his study, he folds his hands behind him and lets himself breathe.

Which is when the black sphere appears in the middle of his study and vanishes, and Kei's unconscious form drops onto the floor.

...

There was no body. That was what kept her from breaking down completely over the past six hours. Six hours of them combing the wreckage, trying to find any trace of her. But nothing, outside of bloodstains and the signatures of her AT Field. And so, as she has for the past two days, since the Ree found her and Pieter in Terminal Dogma, she sits at her desk, waiting, hands clasped in front of her face.

And then, as if in answer, her phone rings. The number is unlisted, and she silently picks the receiver up and holds it to her ear.

"Hello."

"*Hello.*"

Her chest hitches, the pit of her stomach drops. Clenching her eyes shut, she gives off the first relieved breath she's had.

"Kei," she says, "Are you alright?"

A hesitation on the other line.

"*I am...I was hurt, but I'm recovering. Lilly found me, and sent me away. Please, don't look for me.*"

Yui nods, biting her lip.

"I'm sorry," she says, hearing her say the same words at the same time, "Me, first. I'm sorry I lied to you, Kei. About Ichi, about...about anything. I thought I was protecting you by not telling you but...I guess I hurt you more when you found out."

Hesitation on the other line, Yui silently asking that she not hang up.

"*I'm sorry, too,*" Kei says, "*I...should have told you about...everything. I...didn't trust you. Or anyone.*"

Yui nods, her knuckles white around the phone.

"*Did you lie to me about being your favorite?*"

"No," Yui says, "Except...except, Kei, I never thought of it that way. Do you understand?"

Silence on the other end. Feeling it slipping away, feeling it drawing away from her, she presses on.

"Kei, I never wanted to play favorites," she says, "I saw each of you differently. Ichi was my baby, Shinji was my son, and you...out of all that you can be, out of all that you can do, do you have any idea how flattered I was that you wanted to be me?"

"*I...see. Were we...projects? Experiments?*"

"Kei, you were Naoko's projects. You were Naoko's experiments. You are *my* daughter. Nothing ever changes that."

Silence on the other end, only some sounds like choking. Sounds like shaking, breath rattling.

"*I need to find myself,*" Kei says, "*I've...tried to be you for so long, I want to see who...I am.*"

"Okay. Please keep in touch. Please don't cut me or your sisters out, okay?"

"*I won't. If I need to, could I...*"

Yui smiles as the words die in Kei's throat.

"If you ever need to come home, you're welcome to," she says, "And tell Kaworu that if he harms a hair on your head, I will come after him myself."

A pause on the other end, something dropping.

"*How did you know where I was?"*

She smiles, wider, tears running freely down her cheeks. A small laugh, in spite of herself.

"No trackers, nothing like that," she says, "I just guessed that if you could be anywhere, it would be with him. If you need anything, just ask me, okay?"

A nod on the other end, her hair rubbing against the receiver. A soft voice next to hers, his she can tell, before she clears her throat.

"*I will be in touch. I should go."*

"Okay," Yui says, leaning back in her chair, "Kei, I love you. Don't forget that."

Silence, for a moment. A pregnant pause.

"*I love you too...Mom."*

A click, and the phone goes dead. Placing the phone on the deck with shaking fingers, Yui pulls her hands back over her face, muffling her voice as she cries.

Chapter 71: Bondageing

The classroom goes silent as he enters. The normal hustle and bustle of the Tokyo-3 municipal high school, where he has been cleared to return to two days after they destroyed the last Angel, ends when he walks through the door. For the past week, especially following the return from New Vegas, frequent questions were directed at his friends about his circumstances.

He's flattered, to a degree. Part of him wonders if they were asking if he was dead so they could be cleared to hit on Asuka. Part of him also knows that if he was dead and they tried that, Rei would murder them in their sleep. Maybe.

The teacher does not react. He wonders if the teacher is Section 2. Nothing that they do, from Kei's introduction to Rei's constant...Reiness...seems to phase the old man. Well, then again, he has known Rei for a while, and the stories he hears about Professor Fuyutsuki may be an indication of what prolonged Rei exposure does.

So, it is with some hesitation that Shinji re-entered his homeroom class. The noise stopped. Even Hikari, who is normally unflappable, even when confronted with the possibility of multiple Rei, went silent, the orders dying in her throat when she saw him. Pale skin, blue hair, red eyes. On the surface, perfectly resembling Shinji Ikari. Save for the Reiness.

Silence reigns. On one hand, they notice the absence of Kei. Some of those who are less...morally...inclined feel fortunate. On the other hand, they notice Shinji, as Rei skips over to her desk and Asuka leans on her crutch, the support given by her plugsuit unavailable in her school uniform.

He clears his throat.

"Um...hey."

It starts in the back of the room. One of the largest students, the captain of the school football team, emits a shriek more commonly associated with horror movie actresses, spreading like an infection vector to the desks surrounding him, cascading through the entire room.

Save for Kensuke, who smiles.

Hikari starts shouting, composing herself with surprising speed as questions of 'infection', 'communicable' and 'mating pairs' are bandied about. Shinji walks over to his seat, sitting down, and opening his lap top.

And then the room goes silent again.

There is another girl in front of the classroom. Everyone turns to Rei, then back to the girl. Then back to Rei. Then back to the girl. Both are identical, but there is no question that they are not the same, nor is this girl Kei. For one thing, she's smiling. For another, she's wearing a french maid outfit.

"*Bonjour*," she says, "I am Zyuu Ayanami, another of Rei's long lost sisters. It is a pleasure to meet you all."

And then the class starts screaming again.

Chapter 71: Bond(age)ing

One day earlier.

The infirmary is different from the others that are used at NERV. For one thing, the monitors are more specialized, reading off numbers on Core stability and activity. Secondly, the infirmary is about on the same level as Terminal Dogma. Not as in security, but on actual physical level. This is the Ree infirmary.

And currently, surrounded by her six sisters, Zyuu Ayanami is sitting up in the white hospital bed as Yui continues pouring over the readings on her fold out monitor. Sitting in one of the chairs in the white tiled room which for some reason resembles a large apartment, he waits.

"Odd," Yui says, "Your core has stabilized completely."

"What's that mean?" Shinji asks.

"It means Zyuu's no longer in any danger of destabilization," Yui says, and reaches over, ruffling her daughter's hair, "Congratulations, Zyuu. You should be cleared to leave Sheol by tomorrow, then."

All seven Ree squeal in delight. Shinji shifts slightly in his seat. It's been an eventful day. For one thing there is...this...and also the small

revelation Mom told him about Kei, and why she left.

"Alright," Yui says, "I'm going to go and talk with your father about Zyuu coming topside. Girls, play nice."

Yui exits, and Shinji turns from the door to his seven half sisters.

"So," Shinji says, "Kei had a plan to kill us all?"

"Yep," Nana says, swaying back and forth, "I thought it was pretty good, too."

"Very well planned out," Hatchi adds.

"Very origami-ed," Iti adds.

"She means organized," Rei corrects.

Shinji clears his throat, glancing between the girls he can now identify individually, despite them all being identical.

"You're not...concerned?" he asks, "I mean...she had a plan to kill us all."

"Oh, so do we."

Shinji goes silent at Rei's off hand statement, staring at her.

"You mean...you all have..."

"We each have one," Rei corrects, smiling. Very widely smiling.

Shinji considers that statement, that the Ree each have a plan to kill everyone at NERV.

"Why?"

"To get it out of our systems," Hatchi says, "My plan involves hacking the MAGI on NERV-LUNA and using the magnetic launch rail to throw a chunk of the Moon at the Geofront at relativistic speeds."

Shinji blinks, and turns from her to Iti.

"I weaponize Ophiocordyceps unilateralis to use on humans and distribute it through the vent system!"

He turns to the next.

"I outfit bears with tentacled battle armor," Kiko squeals, "More hugs! From the inside!"

He turns. Siyon smiles back. Best leave that one to the imagination, he thinks, and turns to the next.

"I blow up the core," Nana says.

"Of an Eva?"

Nana shakes her head.

"Of the Geofront?"

Nana shakes her head.

"Of the Earth?"

Nana shakes her head.

"Of the sun?"

Nana smiles.

"We invented a device which disrupts fusion," she says with a wide, toothy smile, "Big *BOOM*."

He quickly turns to Zyuu.

"I have an enclosure in Australia which I use to remote train a group of mutated Honey Badgers," she says, "That's how I kill everyone. Except you."

"How do I die?" Shinji asks.

Zyuu smiles, widely, and Shinji turns to Rei.

"I earn the trust of NERV, get my Evangelion upgraded to a high end model with superior firepower, and wait for the right moment to start my massacre."

Shinji stares at her, unblinking.

"Isn't that...kind of...like what's happening right now?"

Rei smiles, lolling back and forth on her heels. On cue, Kiko hands him the paper bag to start hyperventilating into.

...

Perspective is a tricky thing. One must never discount that a population of three billion- the total population of mankind as of 2017- will see the world in three billion different ways. One example of this is the 16 year old girl currently sitting near the window at the back of the room. It gives her a good view of the entire class, she muses, and lets her keep her attention focused.

Zyuu Ayanami has her laptop out, her ears open, and is listening to the teacher drone on about life before Second Impact. Well, partially listening, partially letting her gaze wander to the object of her amorous desires. The perspective of Zyuu, the world of Zyuu, is a step removed from that of most normal men and women. It is a land where accents are the norm, and where her own slightly slanted way of speaking is her attempting to fit in.

More importantly, it is a world where the focus on one individual creates a speech pattern slightly...different...than in the regular world. Where one sees a slightly gangly, albeit handsome boy of sixteen years, she sees a modern Adonis, his school uniform replaced by a towel tied around his waist, knotted like a challenge to be conquered.

Where all the rest of the class hear him say, "Hey," she heard, "*Hello, ladies,*" in a deep, drawling *man* voice.

Part of her in jealous of Asuka for managing to deflower him. Part of her wants to grill Asuka for details. Part of her looks forward to the fact that, since he technically is in a new body, he can be deflowered *again.* By her.

"Zyuu."

Their ally, the one she and Iti selected from the masses of males to be their retainer in the social world, who smiles at her. Kensuke Aida, steady smile on his face, pushes his glasses up his nose and folds his hands in front of his face.

Which is right when the lunch bell rings.

Exactly as planned.

He is still getting the strange looks. The initial shock of him being Ree-ified, as they put it, died down when he did not attempt to hang from tree branches or crawl around the ductwork, but he is still getting odd looks, especially from the girls. Someone may have blabbed about him and Asuka, but the only ones who know about them having sex are Rei, Zyuu, Hikari, and Touji, and none of them are likely to start rumors.

In theory.

He may be an albino, but the sun doesn't bother him like it should. Then again, Rei doesn't have a problem with it, either. Mom said it was something along the lines of a Lilithian trait, whatever that means.

So when they would normally get the rest of lunch off for stuff like going outside, he decided to go back to the classroom. His computer is open and he checks emails, finding the occasional email from Ichi which has no text in it. At least she's responding, he comforts himself with. Although it isn't much, it's what he has to live with for right now.

"Hey."

He looks up. Hikari has entered the room again, smiling at him. She has a nice smile, he notes. Closing the laptop, he smiles back as she walks over, tapping his fingers on his laptop.

"So, I take it Asuka kept you updated on what happened?" he asks.

"Yeah," Hikari responds, walking over as he stands up, putting the laptop back into his schoolbag, "She did."

He nods, hands in his pockets, the two of them alone in the classroom.

"So," he says, "What's up?"

A moment passes. She smiles wider. And then, she slams him against the wall and jams her tongue down his throat.

...

She noticed the odd looks they were giving Shinji. She doesn't blame

them, either. She had trouble adjusting to his change as well, but she had a few more days than them to get used to it. It was not easy, seeing the change, seeing the consequences of it. From what she was told, he only put himself at that risk to save her and Ichi. It makes her feel flattered. It makes her feel guilty. It makes her feel-

"Heee~ey."

She looks up, the tree's shade giving way to the hanging upside down Rei. Hanging by her toes, swaying back and forth with her grin on her face, Asuka squeaks and pulls herself up, leaning on the crutch that Rei hands to her.

"H-hi, Rei. What are you doing?"

Rei grins wider.

"Shinji's been kidnapped by some girls," Rei says, "Are you a bad enough girl to rescue your boyfriend?"

Asuka blinks. The word *bad* has always had connotations and an effect on her. Back when Mother was...Mother...just her saying she was *bad* would make her seize up. But that was then, this is now. She forces it down, a quick chat with her...others...in her mind keeping her from panicking.

"What?"

"Shinji's kinda giving off Big Mommy's WHUMPA aura," Rei responds, "So, every girl in 50 yards kinda wants to strap him in and make him feel the G's!"

That is too much, Asuka thinks. First the entire disaster in New Vegas, then this. It seems like life goes out of its way to mess with her. Her anchor, her moral support; now it seems every girl in the school is going to try to make him go astray. Only a timely extension of Rei's AT Field keeps her from collapsing backwards, as Asuka clenches her eyes shut, fighting the urge to run away.

"You okay?" Rei asks, "If you want, you can piggy back on my while I give those girls a bad touch."

"No."

Asuka stands up, leaning on her crutch. She has finally had *enough.* If the world itself is aligning against her, then she's just going to have to

fight the whole damn world. Turning to Rei, her face splits into a grin.

"Come on," she says, "No one's taking *my* Shinji away."

...

The office of Pieter Sohryu, formerly the office of Kozou Fuyutsuki, is a place of controlled order and balanced chaos. There is little in the way of diagrams and blueprints that decorate the offices of the other department heads of NERV, nor the imposing size of Commander Ikari's office. Instead, it is a large office, larger than most but not huge. In place of the blueprints there is a panorama view of NERV-2's overlook of the Black Forest.

Of course, it being once Kozou's office, it meant a lot of Kozou's...modifications...were still intact. He has a heavy file cabinet set up on the trap door where the examination bed would rise up. Additionally, he found in his first week in this office that there was a button inside the top desk draw which caused lubricant to shoot out of the desk's underside, and had the wires disconnected. He has no idea what that button was for, and in all honest never wanted to know.

On his desk there are three pictures in front of the stack of papers, folders, and the desktop computer he constantly asks Mari how to use. There is a picture of both his daughters, and between the two pictures is a digital frame which rotates between a picture of his two ex wives, and a picture of his college, at the press of a button.

Which is thankfully on the picture of the college as the door opens. Looking up, Pieter catches a glimpse of Kyoko as she marches into his office, holding two folders which she, without a word, slams onto his desk.

"Problem?" he asks.

"Yes," she seethes through grit teeth, "I just went over everything and confirmed that you and Yui were telling the truth. That you *resisted* Lilith in Terminal Dogma."

He nods.

"Well, that's wonderful," Kyoko says, "Perfect. So maybe now you grow up, seventeen years too late!"

Despite being a good bit thinner than him and a little shorter than him, Hikari is surprisingly strong. He has been working out, but she pins him without any real effort, which he subconsciously blames on him being surprised that she stuck her tongue down his throat. Pulling back, Shinji gasps, the almost drunken smile having spread from cheek to red cheek, Hikari swaying back and forth as if drunk.

"What," he gasps, "Hikari, what are you doing?"

"Oh, come on," she giggles, "You were thinking about it, weren't you?"

He tries to push her back, gently. This isn't right, he thinks. This is definitely not right, and she may not smell drunk but she is definitely acting drunk.

"Hikari, this is a bad-"

"Mm-hm," she says with a grin, "It's a very bad idea. I'm liking bad ideas."

She kisses him again, grabbing his hands and pinning them, rubbing up against him, running her foot against the back of his leg.

It is as she is holding him against the wall that her free hand reaches down, disengaging the kiss as she falls to her knees and yanks open his zipper. Her reward for such a thing, far be it from the sight she expected, is in fact a surprised trill followed by a jet of water that propels her across the classroom.

8V!

"Thanks, Lilly!" he yells, zipping his pants back up before turning to the classroom door and sprinting.

Swinging the door open, he conscience takes over for a brief second. Turning back to the classroom when he hears the groan, he realizes the blast of water from Lilly tossed her across the room. There's a good chance that she broker something, he rationalizes, and whether or not she just stuck her tongue down his throat, he can't just turn his back on her.

"Hikari?" he yells, "Are you alright?"

The answer to that question is catching a white shirt to the face, which gives the now topless Hikari the distraction needed to tackle him. Which also gives the three girls in the doorway the chance they need to grab him as well.

...

The room comes to life as a single spotlight shines down on the center. Standing within it, Gendo Ikari waits as the single monolith, labeled 06, appears and fades out to reveal the sitting form of Katsuhito Ikari, ever present lollipop in his mouth. The aged Professor assesses his son-in-law, as he does in every conversation they have. The history between them has been cordial, formal, but never familiar, as if the old man has never accepted the Supreme Commander of NERV as his son in law.

"Gendo," Katsuhito says, "To what do I owe this conversation?"

"We have a problem," Gendo responds, "What happened to 05?"

"Something we are still to piece together," Ikari responds, raising a dark eyebrow, "Considering the disaster the last two Angels have been, I must ask whether or not you have finished putting your house in order, Commander."

"What does that have to do with it?"

Ikari smirks.

"Because one person in your staff does know what exactly happened to Spencer. I suggest directing Captain Kirishima's debriefing personally."

...

A yell, a struggle, and a whimper, and Shinji leaps out of the classroom, four sets of female hands clawing at his pants leg. Sprinting, he makes a run for it, speeding down the school corridors as he hears more squeals, heart pounding in his ears as he leaps down the stairs and into the first floor. This is *not right,* he realizes. The first indication was probably Hikari playing tonsil hockey with him, but three other girls who he can't even remember the names of?

Something is *wrong*.

More importantly, this is the wrong situation to be in. He has to get out of the school, now, before he ends up in this situation with Asuka walking in. That would not end well for *anyone*.

A familiar face turns the corner, and Shinji gives off a relieved breath, skidding to a stop. Both stop, his friend tilting her head, raising an eyebrow as she purses her lips.

"Mana! Thank *God!* Something's going wrong here!"

Mana smiles. It is not her normal, half smile, the one she usually gives when she makes a sarcastic remark or an untoward observation. No, this is the same, half drunk smile Hikari gave off before she jumped him, and Shinji dry swallows, looking for an escape route before Mana grabs him by the collar and lifts him up with one hand, slamming his back against the lockers.

"Pants. Off. *Now*."

"*OPTIC BLAST!"*

A beam of violet light encompasses Mana, tossing her down the hallway, Shinji falling onto his ass as Mari walks over, slipping her glasses back on. Well, great, he thinks. Now not only is he going to get violated by Mana, now he can also get double teamed by his girlfriend's *sister*.

"Okay, get running," Mari says, adjusting her glasses, "Long story short, you're kind of putting out an Anti-AT Field. You know, like Lilith does down in Terminal D."

"Wait...what?"

"Just got the info from your Mom," Mari says, "Don't worry, I'm not affected. You know, being an Angel and all."

"Really?"

"Yep. Besides which, you're Asuka's. She knows, by the way. She said she had to go and get something to deal with it. So tread lightly."

He nods, and takes off in a sprint, just as the sounds of energy blasts and heavy punches fills the corridor behind him. Skidding into a turn, he leaps the stairs two at a time, heading towards the basement. If

Mom knows, she might have a way to fix this. He needs to get to NERV. He needs to-

"*Bonjour."*

"Oh, *Crap.*"

...

"So, let me get this straight. You get stuck down in Terminal Dogma with Yui. Somehow, you show actual self restraint for the first time I've *known* you. And somehow, this is supposed to bring me comfort?"

He says nothing, watching as Kyoko paces in front of his desk. His original impression was that Kyoko would be ecstatic by the news that he managed to control himself down in Terminal Dogma. His initial impressions were, to put it lightly, dead wrong.

"Of course, I asked her why," Kyoko says, "I know you shared a hotel room with Ikari. I know that you're attracted to her, and probably don't act on it because you have a healthy fear of the Commander like anyone with more than two braincells to rub together. All she told me was to ask you."

Slamming her hands against the desk, she stares him down, their eyes meeting.

"So, I'm here," she says, "Fess up. What possibly made you grow the Hell up?"

He folds his hands on his desk, staring at her as she glares back. So, he thinks, it came to this. May as well.

"I told Yui why," he says, "Because I remembered when you kicked me out. I remembered you screaming at me when you found out about me and Claire."

She steps back. Her breath catches in her throat, her heels clattering against the floor as she stumbles, staring at him. Her glare does not soften, becoming sharper, probing as he stands up, clearing his throat as she assesses him with her gaze.

"Kyoko," he says, "I *screwed up.* And I've ignored that for years. I have hurt you, and I hurt our daughter because of it, and I've never done

anything but blame you when it was my fault."

"I was a complete bitch," she says, teeth grinding, "To you. To everyone. I make no apologies for it, but-"

"But let me finish," he says, rounding the desk, standing in front of her, "Kyoko, I hurt you. I *never* want to do that again. That's what I told Yui, and it's true. I was selfish, immature, and I just did what I wanted, not what I needed to do."

Tenderly, tentatively, he places his hands on her arms, looking her in the eyes.

"Kyoko," he says, "I'm *sorry*."

Her response is exactly what he expected. A slap to the face which makes his head ring.

...

Shinji will freely admit, that as a pure guilty pleasure, Zyuu is hot. His sisters inherit their looks from their mother, and in all honesty Yui Ikari is a woman who has transitioned to middle age remarkably well. Rei and the Ree are all of them incredibly attractive for reasons he tries to not go into because it makes him feel dirty, and add to that Zyuu's insistence of dressing as a fetish maid, and Shinji has to admit that it gets attention.

What is also getting his attention is the fact that he's missing half of a pant leg, now reduced to a string trailing on the floor, ending with the sewing needles Zyuu is using for the novel exercise of destroying clothes rather than creating them.

"Zyuu, this is a bad idea," he says, skittering back, halfway across the boiler room she has cornered him in, "I mean, I'm your brother! This isn't really legal!"

"Ni ce que je vais faire pour vous," she says with a giggle.

He cases the room. There's a floor ventilation duct, and he's pretty sure it doesn't lead to a furnace of some kind. Meanwhile, he's now missing the entire pants leg. Zyuu is fast.

"Zyuu, you really don't want to do this-"

"Au contraire, j'ai voulu faire depuis que j'ai six ans."

Tossing aside the sewing needles, Zyuu lunges. Instead of tackling him, ripping the remainders of her clothes off of him, and doing *stuff* to him, however, her ankle hits the almost invisible trip wire he crawled under. High tensile cable wraps around her ankles, and with a decidingly french squeal, she is lifted up to hang upside down from the ceiling.

"Qu'est ce que c'est? Juste au moment où j'allais pour obtenir l'insertion totale?" she yells in outrage, making a point to get her cleavage to bounce. She squeals again when someone pushes her aside, swinging from side to side as the apparent savior comes into view.

"Heee~ey there," Kensuke says, flashing a smile.

The two stare at each other. Zyuu continues squealing.

"Are you going to try to...do something...to me?"

Kensuke continues smiling.

"Maaa~aybe," he says. He blinks, light reflecting off of his glasses, holding a cattle prod in his left hand. The tongs spark.

"Ken," Shinji says, "What did the Ree do to you?"

He smiles wider. He has many teeth.

"Stuff."

"Nous l'avons fait en forme!"

Well, Shinji thinks, at least Zyuu's pacified. Maybe he doesn't have to run back to NERV. Maybe, he can-

"Sooo~o," Ken says, a very Ree-like grin on his face, "Zyuu and I talked it over. We're willing to share."

"*Oui!"*

And Shinji breaks through the ventilation grate with a single punch before diving into the narrow passage.

...

"*Doctor Yui Ikari; brilliant scientist, doting mother, world-class supermodel-*"

"Excuse me?"

Silence for a moment from the speakers in her office, as the voice clears its throat. While having a new AI loaded onto the MAGI to help handle the processing load is a good thing, what has come to bite them on the ass is that the Narrator is very talkative, and possibly has a thing for her. After all, in the game world the Ree created, it did murder her husband's character and marry hers.

Although how that would work in a G-rated game is beyond her, outside of 'narration.' She shakes her head, musing for a moment as she goes over the reports about Ichi's Core activity. Between the issues she's dealing with concerning Pieter and Kyoko, and the MAGI flirting with her, she and Gendo haven't had much time for each other. Well, that and the last Angel blasting holes through the Geofront and melting several of the base armor layers, to. That's important, to.

"*And lo, as the door open, and in enters Doctor Akagi."*

The door opens to Yui's office, and Ritsuko walks in, holding her PDA in front of her.

"Ritsuko, what's wrong?"

"We looked into the problem Shinji has," Akagi explains, "And figured out its triggers and how to shut it off. You're not going to like this."

...

Ductwork navigation is not his strong suit. He needs to work on his sense of direction. Instead of somehow finding a path all the way down to NERV, he found a path which lead him straight into the school auditorium. More importantly, it lead him straight into the school auditorium, where all the girls were. The Tokyo-3 municipal high school has a population of around 700. Of that population, there are 370 girls. All of them, he figures, are there. All of them, staring at him as he lands on his ass in the middle of the auditorium, with a look in their eyes much like a predator over fresh kill.

"Get him!" Hikari roars. They charge, Shinji shrieking, scrambling to his feet and sprinting. Too late, as one grabs his ankles, Shinji

dropping to the ground as Hikari scrambles onto him first. She pins him to the ground, surprisingly strong all considering, smiling from ear to ear as he grunts, squeaks, and tries to deny her access to his pants.

Which is right when the red clad fist belts her across the face, tossing her off Shinji before a blast of fire gets their attention. Shinji looks up, seeing his savior, and smiles. Clad her in her red and pink plugsuit, the orange omnitool glowing faintly on her left hand, Asuka taps a button on her right wrist. Extra padding folds out, hardening into armor over her torso, shoulders, arms and legs, the plugsuit becoming bulkier, more defined.

"You'll thank me for that later," Asuka says, and turns from the unconscious Hikari to Shinji, "Are you alright?"

"So far," he responds, "Mari told me what's happening."

She nods, and turns slightly, turning to the floor.

"Rei," she says, "Get Shinji to NERV."

The ventilation grate underneath Shinji pops open, and a pale hand grabs him and drags him under to his weak protests. Standing before the assembled crowd, Asuka blows a short cut bang out of her eyes. One down. A couple hundred more to go. Some would ask her if he's worth it. She'd say 'yes,' every time.

"Okay," she says, her voice dangerously quiet, carrying more slow anger than anyone has ever heard from her, "You touched my Shinji. Now? I touch *you*."

Chapter 72: Asuka Sohryu vs the World

The ductwork overhead echoes with the sounds of impacts and his own grunts before the ventilation grate opens up and Shinji drops ten feet onto his face. His body as a Nephilem is considerably more sturdy, he has noticed, and can take these sorts of impacts without flinching. A thankful thing, which he doesn't really thank anything for as he groans, pulling himself to his feet and freezing as he finds a woman appraising him.

"Shinji? Are you okay?"

Maya Ibuki looks him over. Internally, Shinji freezes, knowing that he has to run. Run right *now*, or else he's in trouble again.

Which is when it catches him completely by surprise when Maya takes out her PDA and switches over to the walky talky function without even a flush to her cheeks or the listing that the girls at the high school were doing.

"Doctor Ikari? Yes, Shinji's here. We're at junction B-2 on floor B21. I'll send him right up to your office."

Her PDA beeps again.

"Shinji, Doctor Akagi needs me down in the Project E labs," she says, hand on his shoulder and pointing down the hall, "Go down the hallway, make two lefts. Take the lift up to B14 and your mother's office will be the first door on your right."

He nods, slowly, watching her walk away before beginning to walk down the hall. Maybe, he muses, the field doesn't affect women over a certain age. Maya is in her twenties, so maybe there's a cut off point. Shrugging, he turns the corner. Still missing most of a pants leg and stumbling, he still sees the three backup bridge crew, the three girls around Maya's age who he can't remember the names of.

He smiles, nodding in greeting. They smile back. Their cheeks flush red. And Shinji squeaks, jumping over them as all three lunge at them, leaving them in a writhing heap on the floor before sprinting down the hallway, skidding through his turns, and leaping into the thankfully empty elevator.

Chapter 72: Asuka Sohyu vs. the World

Wi-Fi connection activated.

Searching Google

Loading youtube videos

Muscle memory loaded

The lines of her armor glow, and as the collective girls advance, Asuka takes a step back, wheeling out her arms as she puts her weight on her back leg, her toes on her front foot barely touching the ground as he hands take the Crane position.

Her suit's AI and adaptive systems work like a charm.

She now knows Kung Fu.

The first girls go to attack, and Asuka lets instinct take over. Which is right when she lurches forward and slams her forehead into one girl's fist, cracking the girl's knuckles as both of them scream. Her omnitool comes to life, light and forcefields coming to life to form two hamsters connected by a chain.

"What the *Hell?* Computer, what did you choose?"

A display pops up.

"What the *Hell* is *Kung Pow?"*

...

As much friction that she has had with her only son over the past few weeks, partially due to actions of her own, Yui Ikari still believes it might be overexaggeration on his part that her son is keeping on the other side of her office from her. Rolling her eyes and continuing to go over the results of the findings Ritsuko sent her, she waits. Shinji has flattened his back against the wall by her door, and when Yui moves her chair closer to her desk he inches to the side, keeping the same distance from her.

"Shinji," she says, "We've studied the effects of the Anti-AT Field you're projecting. It doesn't effect family."

"Yes it does!"

She sighs. This is going to take a while.

"You're a Lilithian Nephilim. That means, like Lilith, your biology and functions are designed around creating multiple healthy children. A child resulting from immediate inbreeding will not be healthy, and as such is not a desirable outcome."

"Well it affected Zyuu! She was taking my pants apart with a sewing needle!"

They stare at each other. Thinking it over, he steps away from the wall, walking over to the chair opposite her desk.

"Wait, maybe that was just Zyuu being Zyuu?"

"My thoughts exactly," Yui says, reaching into the fridge underneath her desk and taking out a can of tea, "Milk tea?"

He nods, taking the offered can, popping the lid and drinking it greedily. Another affect of his change, Yui notes. Considering his new abilities, his increased metabolism is coming into play slower than it did for the Ree, but that may be because he lacks an S2 organ. She jots down the notes, and turns back to him.

"Okay," she says, "I had Akagi look into your field when we figured out what you were projecting. We also figured out how to turn it off. Needless to say, I don't like it."

He grimaces.

"Let me guess. I have to have sex?"

She stares at him. Almost visibly deflating, she leans back in her chair, taking off her glasses and pinching the bridge of her nose.

"If only it was that simple," she sighs, "Shinji, we need to talk. We need to talk right now. Because the reason you're projecting this field is not physical or hormonal. You're projecting this field because you're *angry*."

...

She quickly got the situation under control, deactivating the holographic hamsterchucks. She really does need a better intelligence for the suit, but beggars can't be choosers.

Loading.

Accessing Google.

Searching: Enter the Dragon.

Loading.

"Oh yeah," she says with a smile, her body moving in tune with the suit as the muscle memory activates, "Better."

She spins out into a fighting stance, the girls backing away wisely as the orange omnitool on her arm glows. They back away, all of them, acknowledging that this girl in front of them, this girl known for stuttering and shying away has come here to kick their asses. For a moment, Asuka believes this entire situation can be resolved without violence.

"Get her!"

One of the senior girls. Asuka sighs, wheels her hands into position, and motions them forward. Time to get to work.

...

"Back up a minute. I thought I wasn't *able* to get angry anymore."

Yui nods, and then, much to Shinji's surprise, shrugs. One of the pillars of his life has been the concept that his mother always has a clear, defined answer to every problem he has. Even if, as he has realized, the answer is not always a true one.

"I was wrong," Yui says.

Shinji blinks, staring at her.

"Wrong," he says, the words themselves rolling off his tongue like it is the most blasphemous curse known.

"Wrong," she says, "I think. I'm honestly unsure. You are the first male

lilithian nephilim that we ever had, and I only came to several conclusions about you and Unit-01 after the New Vegas attack."

"But...you're never wrong," he repeats, and shakes his head, turning back to her, "Walk me through this, Mom. How do we fix this?"

She takes off her glasses, pinching the bridge of her nose. She is silent, quiet, while he continues to stare at her. Finally, clearing her throat, she places her folded up glasses on her desk and leans back in her chair.

"Shinji, you're connected with Unit-01. Unit-01 used its own materials to repair you when it rejected you after you destroyed Raziel. From what I can tell, you're connected with it, and it's S2 organ, which is making your psychologically healthier than you've been since you came to Tokyo-3. But, at the same time, you're projecting this field."

"You mean Ichi," he says.

She shakes her head.

"No. I mean Unit-01."

He goes silent for a long moment. His fingers tap the arm rest.

"Back up a bit."

She nods.

"Ichi is Unit-01," she says, "She's the controlling intelligence. But at the same time, Unit-01 is also Unit-01. It's like the R-brain. Primal. Unit-01 saved you, after Ichi retreated into the Core."

"And I'm somehow...connected to it?"

Yui nods, sliding her glasses back onto her nose.

"You're connected with it, and despite the fact that you do not have an S2 organ, you can draw on Unit-01's to create your field. You're doing it because you're frustrated and angry. You can't reach Ichi, but neither can I."

They both go silent. They say nothing, his hands on the arm rests, her hands folded on the desk.

"And I think the first thing we need to do is stop treating her like she's a baby," she says, "Come with me. We're going to pay your sister a

visit."

...

Twelve down so far. She isn't even breaking a sweat, wheeling into a circle before hooking a Junior year student across the face with her heel, sending her spinning and into two more. They're berserk at best, none using strategy of any sort, instead charging her and hoping to overwhelm her.

Well, f_ that. She's running on automatic, herding them into her feet and fists. Two months ago, three months ago, she wouldn't have done this. She would have stepped aside and let things happen. Three months ago, four months ago, it would have been Rei or Mana saving the day, getting Shinji out.

Four months ago, five months ago, she'd be stuttering in the corner while she watched the entire school population try to take advantage of her boyfriend. *Her* boyfriend.

Fuck that.

Leaping, she runs across the crowd, heels on the top of their heads, the mob almost moving as one as she runs across the gymnasium on the sea of her rivals, sending them into disarray before jumping off and running towards the supplies on the other side. Ah, good. Volleyball season was starting, which means two things. First, the boys would be watching at any chance they could get, and second, it means there are nets easily available.

Grabbing one end, she pulls the net taught as they charge her, clotheslining them before running the net around the mob, trapping them. There, no one had to get hurt, she can get out of here, and find out what Dr. Ikari's doing to handle it.

"Not so fast, Sparkles!"

A whir in the air, and Asuka jumps out of the way just in time for the blur to slam into the floor where she was, splintering wood and enamel, sending up smoke.

"M-Mana?" Asuka yells.

"Round one, honey," Mana says, rolling her head, "After I finish f_ing

you up, I'm gonna strap that boy in and make like a shop vice!"

Asuka blinks.

"Shinji, or Uri?"

Mana grins.

"Both!"

...

"So, let me get this straight. Asuka...*Asuka*...has defended her claim to Shinji by engaging in a fight with the entire female population of the school."

Maya and Ritsuko nod, standing in front of tactical operations director, standing in Central Dogma as the Big Screen continues roiling in static, one of the many problems they've had as NERV recovers from the attack of the Angel of Might. Many of the surveillance systems had to be hard rebooted, following the shockwaves released when the Angel and Go-kun went at it in the opening phases of the battle.

"Okay, that's *bad,*" Misato says, "Get her out of there. Where's Mari and Mana?"

"Well, that's the thing," Ritsuko says, clearing her throat as the static clears, "We've been monitoring the whole situation through the sensors in Asuka's plugsuit. She's *winning.* Easily."

"Buh?"

The screen clears. Misato stares. The entire female population of the school has been laid out across the gymnasium, while Asuka, the shrinking, shy, adorable girl she's come to see much like her own daughter, trades blows with Mana.

"What the does the plugsuit do?"

"Enhances her strength by a factor of eight," Maya responds, "Added hard shield protection, weapons suite, full computing system that lets her hack other computers and ionize the air into what are basically energy blasts.

Misato smiles, ear to ear.

"Mama *likes."*

...

The bow wave from Mana's punch tosses the netting, exoskeletal enhancements carrying Asuka over it, boxing the soldier girl's ears before Mana grabs her by the collar and yanks her down.

"Hah! Gotcha!"

To which Asuka responds with a headbutt.

Mana releases her, holding her forehead as Asuka stumbles back, recovering first and kicking Mana in the stomach. Mana grunts, patting her stomach, a sound faintly like static filling the air.

"Ah, f-"

The fight music from Star Trek begins playing, the two girls circling each other, Asuka producing a glaive made out of hard light as Mana tosses a golf club she picked up between her hands.

The charge, locking weapons as the notes his their high pitch, growling at each other, spitting and growling as Mana feels her gloves burn against Asuka's weapon and Asuka tries to bend the golf club back, hooking her foot around Mana's ankles.

Asuka leans in, pushing against Mana as her foot kicks out Mana's legs, slamming her to the floor as she straddles her.

"What the Hell is that?" Asuka demands.

"My hard drive! You hit my f_ing hard drive!"

Mana taps her wrist, muttering to herself. A sound like a scratching record and the music turns off, before Mana grabs Asuka and tosses her off. Advancing on her, Mana smirks, cracking her knuckles as Asuka scrambles to her feet.

"Okay, this is *stupid!"* Asuka yells, "You never h-had any interest in Shinji before!"

"Yeah, well, *screw you!*" Mana yells back, "You practically got handed him on a silver plater! I gotta fight tooth and nail for your brother with Legs and Little Miss Fetish Maid! You want him, then you gotta fight for him!"

Asuka's respond is her lip curling down. She knows it's the effects of the Anti-AT Field, the effects of the day and her life on her, but part of her feels a bit betrayed by Mana. She considers the girl her friend, her confidant. But if she does nothing, if she lets it slide, she's always going to be afraid of her trying to get her Shinji. *Her* Shinji.

Mana charges. Asuka steps forward, cracks her knuckles, and punches Mana as hard as she can in the face. The girl stumbles back, and Asuka grabs her by the collar.

"Shinji is *mine,"* Asuka says, "Touch him and Zwei *touches you."*

But Mana is out like a light. Sighing, Asuka gently lays her down. Hopefully they can repair the damage, both personally and physically, when this is over. She should head back to NERV before the girls stir, and she should-

"*It's not over, Asuka!"*

The lights in the gym turn off, spotlights illuminating the center, where a plate retracts and a platform begins rising. This is not good, Asuka concludes, as she knows who just spoke over the loudspeakers, and that also probably explains where all the boys went.

"*If you want to deflower Shinji again-*"

Seven forms, identical, posed on the rising platform.

"*You must first defeat-*"

Seven sets of red eyes glowing in the silhouettes.

"*His seven Evil Half Sisters!"*

And still on the high of having just culled the competition of the entire school, Asuka's feelings on the matter are summed of succinctly, right before they grab her.

"Eep."

...

"Waaaait," Maya says, "Weren't the Ree kind of responsible for them getting together in the first place?"

Misato shrugs.

"I'm pretty sure the girls stopped listening when someone said there was a fight."

...

"They've *what?"*

Yui sighs, turning off the PDA, and turns to Shinji. The floors tick down as the lift speeds to the Cages, and she sighs.

"Yes?" he asks.

"The Ree have commandeered a seven story building, kidnapped Asuka and several other girls, and have set up the building for Asuka to...fight through them. Like a video game."

He nods.

"You're not worried?" she asks.

"Mom, Asuka's saved my ass three times and saved the world more times than that," he responds, "I'm actually pretty confident she can handle the Ree. I'm just worried that they might be underestimating her."

...

Looking up, the converted apartment building looms over her. Tapping her right wrist, her omnitool comes to life, scanning the building and stitching together a map. Sighing, she adjusts the barriers on her plugsuit and walks in. The the lights of lobby dim, the entranceway going dark before a single spotlight shines down on her, and a second spotlight shines down on one of the Ree. She can tell which one it is.

Wearing an oversized cowboy hat over her camouflage headband, armored chaps and an ammo jacket, she spins the oversized revolver

in her hand as she flashes a far too toothy grin.

"Hatchi?" Asuka asks.

"Wrong! I'm-"

Boss 1:

MAGNUM LEOPARD.

...

The office of Pieter Sohryu. They have been silent for several minutes now, Pieter opening his mouth on occasion but thinking better of it, hands in his pockets while Kyoko massages her hand.

"I should hate you with every fiber of my being," she says, softly, "You deserve it. But at the same time, I can't."

He says nothing. It may be the smartest thing he's done all day.

"You hurt me," she says, "You hurt me in the worst possible way you could have."

"I betrayed you-"

"No," she hisses, jamming her finger at his chest, "No, that was not it, Pieter. It wasn't that you betrayed me. That hurt, but not as bad as the other."

He sighs, running his hand through his hair. This isn't nearly as easy as he hoped it would be.

"Then, what?" he asks, "Tell me. Please."

She blinks, staring at him. Folding her arms, she turns away, nails digging into her sleeves.

"You were the first person I knew that stood up to my mother," she says, "I decided I wanted you the moment you shut her up. I'm not sure if I was ever happy, but I believed I was. I thought I *deserved* you, Pieter."

A pause from her. A choking sound, her back turned to him as he stares at her, his expression no longer the certainty he had earlier.

"And then you left me for another woman," Kyoko says, "And I thought I deserved that, to."

He ruffles his hands in his pockets, completely silent. Lips a thin line, eyes on her, he waits. The ticking of the clock the only sound, the whirring of his computer's hard disk, the faint ticking of the camera in the upper right corner.

"I thought I was trash," she says, voice barely above a whisper, "My mother would say that between hits, and I thought it was true. I hated myself for so long, but I just...buried it, like everything else. And look where it got me."

She turns her head, slightly, looks at him out of the corner of her eye.

"So I drove Asuka. At least, I tried to. You've seen it. I was never fit to be a mother. I never should have had a child, much less two. I nearly broke the both of them out of my own ignorance and fear. And for what?"

"Asuka's happy," he says, "Uri's happy."

"When you...joked...that Asuka and Shinji remind you of us, I couldn't stand it," she whispers, "The thought of my own daughter ending up like me...was like a punch in the *gut.* Why in God's name would I want her to be me?"

His hands come down on her shoulders. Slowly, he pulls her back, wrapping his arms around her, holding her close as she clenches her eyes shut and her chest hitches. His lips touch the top of her head, her hair, as his hands wrap around hers.

"Well, that's another way they remind me of us," he says, "Because I can be as dense as anyone else. And I can completely miss how the girl I love is hurting, because I want to think everything's alright. Because as much as you think you've become you're mother, you stepped back and you saw what you were becoming."

"After sixteen years."

"Because of me," he sighs, arms tighter around her, "And I'm sorry. I'm never going to ask for forgiveness I didn't deserve. But I'm trying to do better. That's why I resisted, Kyoko. That's why I didn't give in, down

in Terminal Dogma."

"Fear of consequences," she says.

He shakes his head.

"No," he says, "Because you're *worth* it."

...

Hatchi twirls both pistols before slamming her foot against the floor, several metal plates popping up in the open lobby which Asuka wisely ducks behind, bullets ricocheting off of them. Asuka shrieks, ducking her head, looking up just in time for a bullet to whizz past her hair. She dives out, her omnitool blinking to life before she aims and fires off, a line appearing between her and Hatchi before a blast catches her in the chest.

On the wall, a scoreboard drops down, revealing two meters; one red, one yellow. The yellow one drops down a tick, and the lines on Hatchi's plug suit flash before she grins.

"Alright! Game time!"

She spins out of the way of another blast, arms crossed with the pistols at ready, two slugs popping out the tops before they recock and she opens fire, slowly walking towards Asuka as she ducks behind another plate, waiting for the sounds of the guns clicking before ducking out and blasting Hatchi twice, two more clicks on her meter disappearing.

The room shakes, the metal plates moving in sequence, the cover Asuka had found disappearing abruptly as Hatchi discards her guns and takes out two new pistols, laser sights painting her. Asuka squeaks, two blasts squeezing off and deflecting off a shield she wasn't quite sure she had, the air around her shimmering before she dives out of the way. She fires again, hitting Hatchi in the arm, another tick disappearing. Rolling out of the way, running low to the ground as the cover rises and falls, she takes another hit, the red meter on the wall losing several ticks as a result.

Dropping the pistols, Hatchi's hand glows, forming into a rod of white that folds out into a large rifle with the end like an open funnel. For a second, Asuka asks herself why Hatchi now has a musket. Then she

wisely ducks behind a metal plate as a ball flies past her at twice the speed of sound and makes a car sized hole in the wall.

Hatchi pauses, reaching into her jacket and taking out a long pole, jamming another musket ball as Asuka peeks out from behind the metal plate and fires, hitting Hatchi and sending another tick down. Hatchi grunts, hefts up the rifle, and aims. Wisely, Asuka runs out from behind the metal plate just as the blast hits it and tears it out of the floor.

"Alright!" Hatchi says, "Run, little piggy! *Run!"*

Asuka hits her again, running out from the metal plates, firing constantly before Hatchi tosses aside the rifle, reaching into her jacket and pulling out a chain gun twice her size.

"That isn't right," Asuka says.

"Dirac Armory!" Hatchi yells, "Physics can kiss my-"

Her next word is cut off by the bestial roar of the chain gun's generator coming on line and the barrel spinning, Asuka ducking behind the metal plates as a vertiable hail of bullets rips into the metal plates, into the wall, into the floor. Asuka ducks her head down, gritting her teeth over the horrifying roar, tapping her omnitool and checking the settings. Tapping the power meters, she increases the charge to her main weapon, her shield meters lowering as she decides to take things into her own hands, waiting for the roar to die down before bouncing up and firing. Three ticks on Hatchi's meter disappears, and Hatchi grins as she discards the gun, reaching into her pack and taking out a red sphere.

"Alright! Desperation attack!"

The ball snaps out into a long, golden rod with a spearhead surrounding the red sphere, several golden wings sprouting out as she aims the weapon.

She stamps her foot against the floor, denting the metal as more plates rise into a veritable wall on either side of Asuka. Light gathers at the tip of the spear, the air around Hatchi warping, shuddering in response to the sheer volume of the power gathered around her. Quick calculations are made in Asuka's head, and a quick sweep with the omnitool confirms just how big the blast would be. And with a shriek, she dives, running past the walls and flattening her back against the far side of the room.

"**DIVINE-**"

The light ceases gathering, the metal shuddering in response.

"**BUSTAH!**"

The metal walls set up as cover shred, flying off their hinges, the torrent of red and pink light forming a solid column of power that slams into the far wall, the blast and bow wave missing Asuka by inches. And at the center of the carnage, Hatchi drops the spear, just as the smoke clears and there is a flash of orange.

The omnitool flashes, releasing a burst of ionized air that strikes Hatchi's chest. The meter of the wall ticks down to its last click, glowing and shutting down. Which is when the air around Hatchi blurs, explosions ripping into the floor and wall around her, and in a flash of white and roar of sound she is gone.

Stepping out from behind the metal plate, she blinks at the black mark where Hatchi once was.

"Omigod," she says, knees trembling, hands clenching and unclenching *and did she just kill one of Shinji's sisters, "Omigodomigod-*"

The ceiling ventilation grate opens and Hatchi swings her head down, grinning.

"Sorry! Forget to tell you," she says, "That sorta happens when the energy meter hits bottom! We sorta explode before we sneak out. I'll be in the basement if you need me!"

She ducks back into the duct, and is gone. Shoulders slump and Asuka deflates, leaning against the metal plate.

You Defeated Magnum Leopard!

She looks up, searching for the source of the disembodied voice.

"What?"

You get:

Hover Gun

A sphere of orange light containing a large revolver floats up next to Asuka's head. Raising an eyebrow, she pokes it, finding her finger passing completely through it. Must be some sort of hologram, she

thinks.

And 200 Core pieces!

A bag appears in her hand. Looking in it, she sees small red marbles, the same shade as an Angel's core. She really doesn't want to know how the Ree got their hands on it

"What are these for?"

Buying stuff. Silly.

She blinks. That does sound kind of like the Narrator.

"From who?"

:3.

"Oh. H-hi, Lilly."

...

The form of Unit 01 looms over them, the purple titan silent, like it has been for most of the past two weeks. Two people, the only inhabitants in the Cage, stare at it, as if expecting a reaction. None comes, of course. Even with the blinking lights and sounds of constant construction as work crews repair the underground base, nothing merits a reaction from the sleeping giant.

"Well," Yui says, "I think we may have truly and well screwed up with her."

Shinji turns to his mother, leaning next to her on the catwalk, on level with the eyes of the great beast.

"How?" he asks.

"Because I've figured out that I never stopped treating any of you like children. So I never trusted you like I should have."

She sighs, biting her lip, staring at the impassive mask of the giant.

"So, I kept secrets. Thinking I was protecting you. And look where it's gotten us."

The giant green pod on the ceiling of the auditorium opens, releasing a thick yellow ichor over the ground as several vines unfurl, and release a sphere of interconnected transparent rings, inside of which stands a girl in a green and white plugsuit.

"What," Asuka says.

"Welcome to my adobe, Asuka," Iti says, "I'm-

Boss 2:

Botanical Hamster!

Which is when the wheels of the man sized hamster wheel begin spinning, and Asuka squeals before running, the death ball in quick pursuit. Iti laughs, the vines on the walls reaching out, forming a wall in front of Asuka. She dives out of the wall just as the ball slams into it, caught in it, the field around it flashing before pulling out.

She can see, for a moment, Iti stumbling around inside the ball before beginning her run inside it again, the ball moving in accordance to simple inertia and gaining speed to run her over once again. She fires, the blast bouncing off the hardened sphere before Asuka puts two and two together and runs, the pavement crunching underneath the rolling sphere. Running towards the wall, she dives out of the way at the last moment, watching the ball slam into and through the wall, several more vines unwrapping from the ceiling as the field around the ball flashes once again.

Vines wrap around the walls, forming into entire walls of spikes. It can't be this easy, Asuka tells herself. But on the other hand, Iti is the *second* boss...so maybe it *is*.

She gets up, running at full speed towards the far wall. This should be enough inertia, after all. Skidding to a stop in front of it, she turns to the ball as it disengages and fires at it, drawing Iti's attention. She stands her ground as it speeds up, accelerating towards her. And she dives, rolling to the side as the ball hits the spikes at full speed. A massive explosion rips through the room, and when Asuka opens her eyes, the ball is gone.

"Iti?" she asks.

She peeks her head out of the vent on the ceiling, waves, and ducks back in as Asuka wipes her forehead with a sigh.

You Defeated Botanical Hamster! You get: Hamster Ball!

The air around Asuka shimmers, her feet leaving the ground as she finds herself surrounded by a large orange ball. Her attempts to move find her rolling along the ground, bouncing along the inside of it before it accelerates towards the open elevator doors on the far side of the room, which she now notices has *no elevator inside of it.* And Asuka screams as the ball drops into it, and drops down the shaft.

...

Closing his eyes, he holds his hands equidistant, concentrating as he feels the warmth upon his palms. It is similar to a technique he learned during his early pilot training, where they would try to teach him to center his mind and soul, to better calm himself when it came time to pilot Eva. Like everything, it was a half measure at best, but Uri concentrates. It is an old Tai Chi move, to feel the palms warm, as if holding a ball. But now he feels it physically.

The shimmering sphere of orange appears between his hands, an extension of his AT Field. Down here, on the firing range, he opens shimmering red eyes, the astroturf beneath his feet pulsing like a breathing thing; the air around him shifts, and he cups his hands in front of him before pulling his right hand back and pitching forward.

The sphere ripples and extends into something like a lance, hitting the hardened metal man sized target and ripping it off the treads, flying against the far wall ten meters away. He blinks, clenches his fists, and turns away, only to find Mari standing in front of him. She smiles, taps her temple, and her eyes glow. As the light clears and Uri lays unconscious in front of her, she grabs him by the ankle and ascends, leaving the firing range empty.

...

The hamster ball vanishes and Asuka stands up, the basement well lit and a long, polished metal hallway. The hover gun appears next to her, Lilly appearing on her right as she begins walking down the hall, her omnitool glowing and scanning down it.

"O-okay," she says, "This is n-new."

"It's a secret area," a voice says, "It's where the bonus bosses are."

The voice was coming from Lilly. But not in the same trill that Lilly speaks in. However, she does recognize the voice.

"Kei?"

"...yes," the voice of Kei Ayanami says, Lilly pulsating with each syllable, "Rei convinced me to join in. I offer advice via Lilly."

Asuka nods, continuing to walk.

"How are you?" she asks.

"...fine," Kei responds, and sighs, "I am...doing well. You don't sound upset."

Asuka shrugs, continuing walking as Lilly bounces through the air next to her.

"I d-don't have anything to be upset with you for," she says, "It isn't like you c-cut all your ties with us. You j-just needed to get away. At least you c-called. You could have c-cut us all out of your life."

A pause on the other end.

"I am glad I didn't," Kei responds, a little quieter.

The doors on the end of the hallway open. Stepping out is a faintly robotic body, slightly jerky in its movements. It also is wearing her face, with glowing blue eyes and shoulder length red hair, and Asuka tilts her head as she stares at it.

:o.

"My s-sentiments exactly," Asuka says, "What exactly..."

"*What are you,*" the avatar says, voice digitized and sounding exactly like hers, "*Stupid?"*

Bonus Boss 1:

DARK ASUKA

"What."

"Avatar body," Kei answers, Lilly's form shimmering, "My sisters obtained a video recording of Dr. Sohryu's graduation speech, and used it to extrapolate a personality simulation of her as a teenager. She is designed to be a challenge equal to yourself, powerful and psychologica-"

Asuka brings up her arm, sets the firepower to full, and blows off the Avatar's head with a single blast. Lilly stares at her. The avatar body collapses, glows, and explodes.

"Or not," Kei says, "Carrying on."

Asuka walks through the doors, the double metal plates closing behind her. As she does so, the speakers crackle to life, Rei's lilting *Heee~ey* filling the air.

"*Heee~ey there, we were originally going to have Mari be secret super boss 2, but since she's busy we can't have a sister/sister fight. So, we got us a whole lot of ballistics gel and made up a big mockup so you could fight another super secret boss instead!"*

The doors open again. Shrieking, Asuka runs out, arms and legs pumping and the hovergun and Lilly in sharp pursuit. And right on her tail, the glowing white hand the size of an Evangelion's, supported from inside by a wire mesh and metal pipping, grabs at her.

Bonus Boss 2:

ADAM.

...

"The thing is, Mom, you have to remember that for all the problems, it's...well, it's better. It's better than it is anywhere else, when you look at it."

Standing next to him on the catwalk overlooking Unit-01, Yui allows herself a small smile.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I mean that...remember all those worlds were went to?" Shinji asks, "The other places. You know, where Dad's insane and Asuka's...well,

yeah, and Rei has the personality of a puppet? Those worlds. You know what the difference is? Why it looks like out of all of them, we have a chance of making it through this?"

"Enlighten me," she says.

He smiles, turns to her.

"You," he says.

She raises an eyebrow, motioning him to continue.

"I mean that, you're here," he says, "So you're alive. Dad's not mourning you, I'm...well, I don't know exactly what I am now, but I guess I'm pretty normal, outside of the fact that I can navigate ductwork now. And Rei's Rei, and Asuka's Asuka. We're not...broken, I guess."

He leans against the catwalk, hands wrapping around the railing.

"So, Unit-01 is my baby sister," he says, "And I have eight sisters who had a pretty good childhood, even if you didn't have to take them in."

"Didn't have to?" she asks, leaning next to him, "Even if I didn't give birth to them, they're still my children."

He smiles. She sees the smile, and nods, reaching out and ruffling his hair.

"Good boy," she says, "You're right, to. I guess when you look at it like that. I have nine daughters, one son, all of whom I wouldn't trade for anything. I guess it is a victory, when you see it like that. Even if I couldn't be there all the time."

"I'm pretty sure Aunt Alicia and Uncle Tomoe knew you were watching them the whole time."

"Yes, of course," she sighs, "Watching."

A moment of silence between the two, his hands grinding on the railing.

"If it helps, I didn't actually watch you two," she says, "Kyoko turned off the video cameras before anything interesting happened. I know I sounded like a hypocrite, but you're almost seventeen years old, and that means you're still child. And *my* child."

He nods, his smile bemused.

"What's so funny?" she asks, finding herself unable to stop herself from smirking.

"No, it's just...as much as I moan about not having a normal life," he says, scratching his head, "If it wasn't for the screwed up life where I pilot my 200' tall sister, I wouldn't have met Asuka in the first place."

They share a laugh, turn back to the sleeping giant.

"Does Dad know?"

"About Ichi?" she sighs, "No. Someone's going to have to tell him."

He nods.

"Where is he, anyway?"

...

The double doors open. Behind Asuka, the smoking form the mockup of the First Angel is still burning, Cleaning the liquified ballistics gel off of her head, she walks into the next room as the spotlight comes to life and illuminates the figure standing at the room's center. Asuka freezes. This is *not* good. This is definitely *not good.*

"C-Commander?" she asks.

Illuminated by the spotlight, Gendo Ikari pushes the glasses up the bridge of his nose, the light reflecting off of them like two orange mirrors. His other gloves hand in his pocket, the Supreme Commander of NERV, the most powerful man in the Eastern Hemisphere, allows himself a small smile.

"What are you d-doing here?" she asks.

"Miss Sohryu," he says, "Who's idea do you think this *was?"*

Chapter 73: Girl Time

.

.

Hm.

The slap is hard enough to send Uri stumbling back, tripping over his own shoes and falling into a heap, twisting in the sheets before groaning and swearing in german. Even before he falls, the door opens and she is gone. Once again, the same forceful approach, and once again, she's shot down like *that.*

Mari can't understand it. Yeah, he's kind of *right.* As far as he can tell, he's a full out Angel now. Just like her.

Just like her. So, unlike before, where she tried to flirt with him, when he was Asuka's brother and she was Asuka's half sister, now they really are related. She's Ramiel, he's Uriel or maybe something like that.

And once again, Mari's attempts to flirt with Uri have crashed and burned. And now, she's asking herself *why.* That's probably the part that's making her twist up the most, though. Not the why of Uri shooting her down, but the *why* of why she keeps *doing this.* Uri practically has a girlfriend in the form of Annette. Mana's interested, to, but she's fought alongside him, she's trained alongside him. She hopped onto Unit-00, but she's no soldier.

So why does she keep doing this? Is it because he's hot? Is it because he's Dr. Sohryu's kid? Is it still just her, that *girl* stealing away Uri from his Mother, even if it stopped being needed or even wanted when Asuka and her mom reconciled?

Is she just doing it to do it, and that's it?

Wait.

"Well, *shit.*"

She took a wrong turn somewhere. Probably actually teleported, to.

Right now, she finds herself in a room with several partially metallic spines hanging from the ceiling a good hundred meters up. This has to be the graveyard, she thinks. This has to be where they keep the Eva rejects and the like, and all the other crap they research. Chuckling, she sees the partially dismantled pyramid over by the back.

Ramiel. The source of all her troubles, kept aside and forgotten.

Shooting it a middle finger, she begins walking. She left her PDA, and GPS, in the cubby room she set aside for her ill advised seduction of Uri, so she might as well wander until she can find a MAGI terminal and get a damn map. Walking along, she comes across a doorway, figuring it leads to a hallway, tapping in a release code she dimly remembers from her time as MAGI-04. The door opens, revealing not a hallway but an apartment, lined with book shelves and lamps, with a chandelier swinging from the ceiling. Sitting in a bucket seat, holding a newspaper and smoking a corn cob pipe held up by his mouth tendrils, Junior looks up as Mari stands in the doorway.

Can I help you?

Chapter 73: Girl Time

Deep within, she watches. Like suspended in amber, the world outside is blurry, tinted, voices muted like there is water in her ears. She sees them standing there, watching. She hears them talking, voices like whispers, and she wants to reach out. She wants to talk. But she is still frightened, scared. Hurt.

She is still hurt. Still hurt from the Angel. Still hurt from her brother, seeing what he could become. Still hurt from the lies Mommy told them, how she never was known for who she should be, just who she wanted her to be-

Is that all?

A voice, tinged with red. But not the same red she locks out. Tinged with red around the eyes, around the lips, but everything else like marble.

"Who's there?"

Someone who has been here for very long, Rei.

A pause. A beat, her ears tingling at the name.

"I'm not Rei."

In a perfect world, you would be. In a perfect world, you would grow up to be Rei Ikari. The contact experiment would never happen. You would be a real girl.

Another pause. Another beat.

"What about my sisters?"

They would not exist.

Another pause. Another beat. Memory of eight faces.

"Then that's not a perfect world."

The red lips smile.

Good. First lesson learned. You'll make me proud yet, Ichi.

...

In Brazil, in South America, the effects of Second Impact were felt harshly. Entire countries in South America were destroyed by the blast wave and tidal wave, even if they were spared the larger effects of the Impact Wars. But the shift in climate and the tilting of the Earth meant that the Amazon rain forest was devastated. Entire swaths were lost to encroaching desert.

Dozens of species undiscovered by man were lost to the wastes, to never be found. A legacy of history and biology were gone, destroyed by the foolishness of lilim and adamite.

And on one expanse of the Amazon desert, there is a place which is naught but a plain of sand. Some humans live there, left there as the cataclysms rocked the earth to make an meager life with the scraps that their planet had left them. But even in these wastes, there are children. One child, emaciated but better kept for than her parents, watches as what looks like the first snowflake falls upon the expanse. She has no memory of snow, born years after Second Impact. To her, it is magic.

She cups it in her hands, the glowing flake of light and warmth leaking into her. Her cheeks flush and fill up, her belly full for the first time. Almost instinctively, she drops the flake, letting it come to the ground as the soil beneath it turns rich and dark.

And as the first flower blooms where the flake hits, she looks up to see more of those flakes- no, petals of light- descending. It is then that she first catches the shape above her, and a smile parts her now healthy lips as they descend. For while the adults would run in fear at what she sees, she does not. She is a child, after all. And the wonders of childhood are a special kind of old magic.

And old magic never dies.

I Am.

...

"Rock! Paper! Scissors! Shoot!"

Two hands shoot out. One, gloved red, holds out its index and middle finger. The other, gloved white, has the hand flat, all fingers extended.

"Fuck."

There is a flash of light, a roar of sound like the girls when they 'explode' that makes Asuka reflexively cover her eyes, expecting to open them to find the necessary destruction and the holes in the wall and floor the exits of the Ree leave. Instead, standing in front of her is still the Commander, his face expressionless.

"Good," he says, "You may proceed."

He reaches into his jacket and hands her

You beat: Secret Boss 3: Gendo

You get:

A Gun!

"It's dangerous to go alone," he says, putting the pistol in her hand, "Take this."

She looks at the pistol, looks up, and Gendo is gone. She holds the pistol by the very top, scanning over it with her omnitool.

"It's...empty?" she asks, slowly looking down to find a holster and belt now lying on the floor in front of her, Lilly trilling happily.

Sighing, she buckles the belt around her waist, holstering the gun and walking into the elevator in front of her. She doesn't press a button, the cab instead rising to the third floor. She waits for the doors to open, musing on how with the exception of her boyfriend and a 60 meter tall artificial god, everyone in Shinji's family is apparently insane.

This musing is cut short when a pair of steel tentacles burst through the elevator doors, yanking them open. Asuka screams, shrieks, and dives through the two twisting tendrils, scrambling to her feet and looking up at the source of the two artificial octopus arms.

Suspended by them, coming from a battlesuit colored green and black with a number 09 engraved on her shoulder, the blue haired girl cackles wildly before turning, looking down, and waving with a large, genuine smile.

"K-Kiko?" she asks.

"Wrong! I'm-

Boss 3:

CUDDLE OCTOPUS

...

For all the differences in biology between the Sandalfim and humans, it is worthy of some suspicion on why exactly Junior has a full stock of tea in his apartment down in Sheol. Mari would credit it to Junior and Dad being bros, but then again, Dad guzzles coffee, so that can't be it.

As it is, it's a nice chamomile blend, with a hint of lemon in it. Junior is sipping printer ink out of a paper cup, while they talk in the sitting room of his apartment. The entire place is nice and art deco; like

someone boxed the 50's and transplanted it a few miles beneath the Earth.

So, tell me. What is it that drives you to pursue Uriel?

She perks an eyebrow.

"Uriel? So Uri has an official Angel name now?"

Junior's mouth tendrils twitch, one of his vertical eyes rolling.

Uriel is simply the proper name of Uri. Though, when you put it that way, I could formally refer to you as Mariel.

"Junior-"

All the '-el' meaning means is 'of God.' Though, with as little that is known of the origins of the Angels, it is debatable whether or not this is an appropriate title.

They both go silent. Junior reaches up, scratching behind his neck to a wet, crunching sound as Mari stares at her tea.

You didn't answer the question.

"Well, he's cute," she says, "And..."

She screws her forehead, purses her lips. Cocking an eyebrow, she tries to find some other reason she has obsessively pursued Uri.

Because he is Dr. Sohryu's son? Because your pursuit was your way of getting under Dr. Sohryu's skin?

She sighs, nodding.

"Yeah," she says, "And I get along with her now, so...so why am I even still doing that?"

Junior's mouth tendrils twitch, the Sandalfim remaining silent as she slumps her shoulders. The change is almost a transformation, the pride draining out of her like a physical thing, the bangs falling in front of her face so he cannot see her eyes, even if he does see the wet tracks.

"I guess...I dunno, maybe I'm jealous? I mean, it sounds *shitty*, but I'm jealous of Asuka. We didn't even meet until a few months ago and...and even after all the *shit* Sohryu put her through, Asuka's got

the man she's going to marry. And here I am, I'm the big sister, I'm the hot girl...and I've got no idea."

Which is why you have the friendship with Kirishima.

"Yeah. Mana. We started out trying to get Uri to screw with Sohryu," she sighs, "Then I died, Uri went away. Mana got mind f_ed by Iruel and I get turned into an Angel. And Uri comes back with a girlfriend."

And you wax nostalgic to the days where you and Mana were competing for Uriel.

She laughs with a nod. Adjusting her glasses, she looks up at Junior, smiling.

"Yeah. I guess. Maybe I should try to find myself a new boyfriend. Maybe one who's well spoken, nice. Doesn't care that I'm not human."

Junior's mouth tendrils twitch. One eye narrows.

Mari. Are you flirting with me?

"Yep."

Junior folds his hands in his 'lap,' before bringing up a balled tentacle to his mouth and clearing his throat.

Please do not take this the wrong way, Mari. But by Sandalfim standards, you are quite ugly.

...

You beat: Cuddle Octopus!

You get: Rentacle Tape!

Asuka glances at her shoulders, where four long, sucker lined tentacles wave about in what could be called a friendly fashion. Sighing, she shrugs, the tentacles moving with her as she begins walking towards the elevator.

"W-well, this isn't too b-bad," she says, sighing, "At least they s-set this up to be orderly, so I can't get s-surprise-"

Secret Boss 4:

DINOSAUR TANK

The massive, green metal head of a supremely out of scale tyrannosaur suspended on a tank body breaks through the far wall, roaring and letting loose a jet of fire. Sensibly, Asuka shrieks and runs at full tilt towards the elevator.

...

Mari's response is not what Junior was, in all honesty, expecting. For a girl like her, he figured appearance was a predominating factor. To be called ugly, especially by someone she has expressed interest in, should be a body blow to the ego.

Instead, Mari pitches her head back and laughs.

Okay. That was unexpected.

Mari continues laughing, leaning back in the bucket chair as Junior watches in confusion, blinking both eyes.

"Sorry," she says, rubbing her eyes, "It's just...so, I'm not attractive to you at all?"

You have too many legs and lack prehensile tentacles.

"That's rather specific."

You should ask a human if they would like to have set with a fish.

"Some would."

And every species has a deviant.

...

Breathing in raspings gasps, Asuka watches as the doors to the next floor opens, the impotent roars of the Dinosaur Tank a floor below her as it continues to search for its prey. Walking out of the elevator, she

wipes her forehead, only in time to drop, sliding along the side of the slope. The floor dips like a great bowl, and Asuka looks up to see the massive pillar connected with the ceiling.

"Wait," she says, "I remember studying that. Isn't this a Tokamak fusion reactor?"

A high pitched laugh from the ledge on top of the pillar. Clad in a red and black plugsuit with a leather bomber jacket over her, a pair of black aviator sunglasses, and a beret, Nana laughs maniacally.

Boss 4:

EXPLODING WALRUS

Which is when Asuka realizes that Nana has scaled recreated a device which can make a Sun. This is the sort of thing Nana would *marry* if it was legal. And she has the switch to turn it on in her hand. Four tentacles shoot up and hit the ceiling, carrying Asuka up before the lower level fills with yellow plasma, Nana screaming in triumph as she reaches into Lilly and yanks out a chain gun larger than she is.

"*Alright! DAKKA TIME!"*

Asuka wisely shrieks, the tentacles carrying her along the ceiling as bullets riddle a path after her. Tapping her omnitool, she lets momentum carry her forward as Nana gets a bead on her, just as the air around Asuka forms into a circle and she tucks herself in as the Hamster Ball forms around her. The intertia follows true, and both of them are knocked off the platform as

---

Secret Boss 4:

DINOSAUR TANK

The tyrannosaur head mounted on the tank body bursts through the wall, both girls screaming before they scramble up the sides and run for the elevator.

"The target appeared over the Amazon dessert three hours ago. Judging from its actions and lack of aggression, we're figuring this is an Angel, and not a Cherubim."

The holographic briefing table lights up, showing South America. It zooms in further, over the devastated rain forests, to show a free floating object resembling a group of double helixes linked into a chain. A time lapse, and a swath of the desert below becomes rich soil and forest.

"Holy crap," Misato breathes, "Three hours? How'd it do that?"

"Unknown," Ritsuko responds, "There are theories that the Angels are originally terraforming equipment, and this could be proof. Several local governments have asked us to intervene."

"And it where this gets fun," Pieter says with a smirk, "Is because Brazil and the UN have asked us not to."

Akagi and Misato stare at Pieter. Around the table, Maya continues adjusting the image as Makato clears his throat.

"Several local countries have used the Amazon Desert as a dumping ground for undesirables and refugees since Second Impact," Makato explains, "As far as we can tell, the Angel's effects on the area are also affecting the humans living in the desert. Basically, it's helping them. And they have squatter's rights, so as long as they're in the desert, they are technically the owners of the land."

"Which, three hours ago, was worthless," Misato adds, and snorts, "Oh, sweet and delicious schadenfreude. That's the word, right, Sohryu?"

"Malicious enjoyment of one's misfortune," Pieter says with a nod, "I also took the liberty of getting in touch with Washington, since they're the regional power, even if several cities took some hits from Zeruel's descent."

A click, and the hologram turns to the United States, several red marks over the midwest and west coast labeled with impact numbers. Among them, Detroit, Seattle, and Austin, where lunar debris from Zeruel's awakening hit.

"It looks like someone's put a bounty on Shinji," Pieter says, "Out

contacts in the White House have told us it was not Colbert or anyone in official power, and may have come from Spencer. But, the blame for the New Vegas clusterf_ is now being split between Xavier Spencer and Shinji. I've taken the liberty of increasing Section 2 coverage of the Ikaris, and told the Ree."

"So, if someone tries to take Shinji, the Ree have permission to make them their special friend?"

"Exactly, Katsuragi."

Misato snorts, folding her arms.

"Good."

...

Two girls run screaming from the elevator cab, as the impotent roars of the Dinosaur Tank echo from the floor below. Bent over gasping, Asuka looks up to find Nana with a worried expression on her face.

"Who...who's idea *was that?"* Asuka screams.

Nana glances from side to side. Part of her is worried. Part of Nana, Asuka can tell, is somewhat *aroused* by the pursuing tank.

"Um...we didn't build that," she says, "I'd...kinda know if we built that. I mean, it's *awesome* and it's got *dakka and dakka* but we kinda didn't build that."

Asuka stares at her. She blinks, several times in succession, as she tries to process that odd little tidbit.

"Nana...if you didn't build the Dinosaur Tank, *who did?"*

.

.

.

Wouldn't you like to know?

.

.

.

"Oh, crap."

They two turn. Mana, clad in her SUIT armor, pulls off her helmet as Hikari shifts nervously in place. Rolling her neck, Mana tosses the helmet over to Hikari, who nearly drops it under the weight with a squeak.

"Nana?" Mana asks, "Something go wrong?"

"Maaa~aybe," Nana says, tapping her fingers together, "We sorta got a boss order problem. We got a

---

Secret Boss 4:

DINOSAUR TANK

The oversized head bursts in through the floor, all four girls screaming as it tries to drag itself up on mechanized, undersized arms. It roars, shooting a gout of flame as Hikari shrieks and Mana stares, raising an eyebrow and turning to Nana with a questioning gaze.

Which is right when there is a shriek from overhead and something descends through the hole in the ceiling of the open auditorium. Talons dig into the mechanical face of the tank, tearing out wires before it slips and falls. With a mighty, descending roar, the tank drops, slamming through floors on its way down before it impacts somewhere in the basement, and the great bird, at least twice as tall as them, lands on its talons and stares at them with fixed eyes.

"Huh," Mana says, "Australian Powerful Owl. Didn't expect to see one of those outside of Australia."

The rider of the owl dismounts, high heels landing against the floor as she straightens out the skirt of her french maid outfit. Nodding a greeting, Zyuu smiles in satisfaction, arms folded.

Which is when Asuka walks up to Zyuu and punches her in the face.

.

.

Hee.

.

.

"I guess that's kinda reassuring," Mari sighs, sipping her now cold tea, "That no matter what I do, at least one guy's not going to look at me like a sex object."

Junior nods. These subjects are not ones he enjoys broaching, if only due to how it could affect his relationship with Pieter. And by 'relationship' he means 'chance Pieter will get into a fistfight with him.'

And besides which, Mari. I value your father as a friend. I would not harm a relationship to build a second one, which would also be inappropriate.

She narrows an eye at him, folding her arms.

"Excuse me?"

Junior scratches the back of his head with a tentacle, mouth tendrils twitching.

Right. Forget I said anything.

She purses her lips, continuing to stare at him.

Mari, please consider. What are you looking for in the first place? Shallow physical relationships, or something else? I will not be a paramour, but I will gladly be your friend. It is the very least I can do, Mari.

She nods with a sigh, shoulders rolling back as she sits back in the chair.

"You know, I think that's a good idea," she responds, "I realized I don't have many friends around here. I didn't really have any friends back

in Germany, either. Mainly just people Dad knew."

Junior nods, as she averts her gaze from him, biting her lip.

"I never had a boyfriend, either," she says, "Hard to believe my little sister got that before I did. I guess I just...I dunno. It's weird, you think..."

She smiles, obviously a forced one as she sets the tea cup down on the end table next to the chair, rising and smoothing out her skirt.

"Thanks, Junior," she says, "I'm gonna head topside."

With that, she rises into the air, and vanishes. He can feel the receding blue pattern, as he turns back to his newspaper. Sometimes, he thinks, he worries about her. Especially if she ever figures out the little details of what she is.

...

Nana moves first, grabbing Asuka in a full nelson while Mana tackled Zyuu, locking her arms behind her when the girl got up from being decked. This falls neatly under the category which Mana refers to as *fustercluck,* one of the scenarios being 'someone gets into a grudge match with a Ree.'

"Okay, calm down!" Mana yells, "Let's not do something we're all gonna regret when we see it on the news!"

"I'll t-tell you what you'll r-regret," Asuka yells, tears running down her red face, "T-telling me that w-with a straight face after what you tried!"

"Okay," Hikari says, putting herself between the two, and in the back of her mind putting her life in her hands, "Asuka, this isn't what it looks like!"

"It looks like y-you tried to make a move on my b-boyfriend!" Asuka screams, "What does that *look like?*"

Hikari blanches, turning to Mana for reassurance and finding her, and Zyuu, staring at Asuka instead. Nana, on the other hand, shifts back and forth between her feet, letting Asuka go before taking a step back.

"Yeah," Mana says, "This sucks. I think we've got a break in the chain

of communication, Rep."

"Good point," Hikari sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose, "Okay, let me explain. We're out of the range of Shinji's...whatever he was doing. After you knocked me out, Rei grabbed me and explained the idea."

"What. Idea," Asuka growls.

Hikari grimaces, tapping her fingers together as she looks nervously at Mana.

"Asuka," she says, "This is kind of hard to explain. But...Rei has been recording this the entire time. She's got cameras set up throughout the building, and has been streaming video of this onto the internet."

...

Siyon decided to watch guard, while Mana walked with Asuka into the elevator to the roof. Asuka was silent, though. Not that the girl is all that chatty to begin with, but the silence itself was the worst part. Ever the forward one, ever the outgoing one, even if it is mostly fake, Mana breaks the silence.

"I let you win," she says.

Asuka turns to her.

"What?"

"I let you win," Mana responds, "I'm a trained soldier. I can kick *Misato's* ass."

She grimaces. Not the right thing to say, she thinks. Sighing, folding her arms with a whirr of the SUIT's endoskeleton, she leans against the elevator cab.

"I'll admit," she says, "I'm kinda jealous. You get a nice guy, who's completely devoted to you. Any girl could parade naked in front of him and he won't look twice 'cause he's devoted to you. Meanwhile, me and Mari are in a tug of war with the maid for Uri, an' he's got the sex drive of a f_ing wet fish."

Asuka stares at her, a small hint of a smile crossing her features.

"Okay," she says, "What sort of f-friend gets into a fist fight over a

man?"

"The kind who lets her win in front of witnesses."

The doors to the cab open, revealing a lit roof, ropes around the edges to serve as an impromptu ring. Stepping out, Asuka clicks on the display on her wrist to find more items transferred over, more weapons she presumes she would have gotten over the course of the other floors.

Standing at the center of the ring, clad in a plugsuit like her own modified version, except white and blue instead of red, Rei smiles as Asuka walks to her.

"So," Rei says, "You made it."

"Yeah," Asuka responds, "Wh-what is this about? You were r-recording this?"

Rei nods, smiling from ear to ear.

"Yep," she says, "Aaa~and sending it up on the next, with a few edits of course. Because now, everyone in Tokyo-3 can see you beat the *crap* out of every girl in the school, and then fight your way through everyone else, just to keep your man."

Asuka blinks.

"Wh-what?"

"We~ell, I kind noticed that a lot of girls are eyeing Shinji," she explains, "So, I thought how I could, you know, tell them to back off. I thought about taking them down to meet Big Mommy, but Little Mommy wouldn't like that, and too many would get all tang'ed and stuff, so I thought, 'Let's make Asuka the biggest badass in the city!' An everyone thought it was a great idea! Especially Hikari, when I sorta told her Shinji's off limits."

Rei smiles wider.

"And stuff."

Asuka blinks, glancing around the roof.

"This...w-was for me?"

Rei nods.

"Why?"

"'cause you're my friend," Rei says, her smile more subdued, "And that counts for something with me, Asuka. It really does. You were the first person I know who didn't care that I wasn't normal or stuff, and you never asked for anything from me."

Asuka smiles, faintly.

"Yeah," she says, "H-how long have we been friends? S-since we were six? Th-that's when we became pen pals, wasn't it? I r-remember Mother wasn't too happy with that."

"And you didn't care," Rei responds, and grins wider, "So, wanna do this? One last fight, an' then every girl in the city's going to know what you'd do for my big brother?"

Asuka stares at Rei, still taking in what she's been told. And finally, a small smile crossing her features, she takes a step back. Her omnitool forms around her right arm, the wifi linkup downloading new muscle memory moves.

"Yeah," she says, "L-let's go."

Rei grins, takes a step back, and wheels her hands into a fighting stance.

Final Boss:

TEH REI

The two leap, Rei's right hand surrounded in a blue nimbus of light as the air around her seems to shift in turn with her extending AT Field, just as Asuka's own weapon systems come to full bare, surrounding her right hand with an expanding trail of orange light. As the two come closer and closer, their voices raise an an identical pitch, which is fitting with the identical words coming full blast from their mouths.

"*FALCON*-"

The second word is drowned out with the impact of the two blows, a burst of light and a shockwave sandblasting the pavement underneath them, cracking the sides of the roof and sending the ropes swinging

out in perpetual circles.

Asuka lands first, skipping across the rooftop as her field flashes, flipping back up as Rei closes in, slamming her fist into the ground. Locking her legs around Rei's arm, Asuka twists, grabbing Rei by the collar and bodyslamming her. Two blasts from her omnitool hit the pale girl at point blank range, flaring against Rei's AT Field before Rei blasts her off with a pulse of the field.

The two stand, grinning, the thrill of the battle running down their spines. Asuka brings up her weapon selection as a set of four blue energy tentacles appear from Rei's shoulders and she pulls a miniature Lance of Longinius out of a happily trilling Lilly. With a shout, the two charge as Asuka charges up her omnitool's blast to

---

Secret Boss 4:

DINOSAUR TA-

Just as the tank's head clears the sudden hole in the roof, a blast of plasma bisects the face, two more blasts blowing off the miniature arms before a drill comes down and impales the tank lengthwise. It sputters, growls, and dies, just as Asuka and Rei look up to find Go-kun balancing precariously on the two apartment buildings next to them.

"**That thing was just annoying,**" the repaired Evangelion booms, several discolored patches of metal on him straining faintly from the sudden exertion, "**Ah, right. Sorry. Continue.**"

...

Yui stares at the screen, sighing before clicking off the two options with her mouse. Just like she said, she muses, staring at the screen for a while longer before switching the view back to her desk top and the reports that need filing. The door knocks, and she mutters an affirmative, Misato peaking her head in and waving a pair of wine glasses and a bottle.

"What's the occasion?" Yui asks.

"Asuka becoming Queen Bitch of Tokyo-3 municipal high school," Misato responds with a chuckle, "If I can find Sohryu and the Subdirector, I'll have them join in on the revelries."

"I'll drink to that," Yui says with a grin, taking the proffered drink, "Shinji's aura has turned itself off. We got to the root of what the problem was, so...well, it shouldn't be a problem."

Misato nods, sitting down across from her, sipping the wine.

"You two had a chat?"

"And aired some baggage that needed to be aired," she responds, "We've all made some stupid decisions lately. Including me. Especially me."

"Could always be worse. You fixed it, at least."

Yui nods, sipping her wine as she clicks through reports. Misato is silent, face screwed in thought. Or gas. Yui has always had trouble telling one from the other.

"So," Misato says, "If the Ree didn't build that tank...who did?"

"Odd thing, that. It was apparently built by the MAGI," Yui says, "Orders for parts came from multiple sources. MAGI-03, MAGI-12, MAGI-09 in particular. I haven't seen any sign of Naok00 in the MAGI, and this doesn't match up with her behavior, either. And the Narrator denies knowledge."

"Ah, our small army of AIs. When do we build Skynet, by the way?"

"I have a plan for that," Yui responds, still staring at the screen, "Still. For the MAGIs to go rogue...I'm placing my money on Kihl. The man was insane, and not in a fun way. I wouldn't put it past him that it was some sort of contingency plan to dick with us."

...

It was late when he finally got back to the apartment, changed to a shirt and shorts, and collapsed onto his bed. No sooner that, then his phone range, and he obediently stared at the number and answered it, holding the receiver to his ear.

"Mom?"

"*Asuka is on her way back. I switched off the video cameras and microphones, but I did leave the motion sensors on. Just, be safe."*

"Mom, I'm exhausted. I don't have the energy for sex."

"*You're a teenager, Shinji. You'd be surprised. I'm just saying, I trust you on this. Even if I am your mother.*"

Shinji grins, softly laughing to himself.

"Okay, Mom," he says, "And...thanks. Goodnight."

The call ends, and he closes the phone, laying back on the bed as he hears the footsteps, the shuffling, and the door closing down the hallway in the apartment. Keeping himself from dozing off, he keeps one eye open as the door to the bedroom opens. Clad in her long, pink nightgown, Asuka enters, tip toeing over to the bed and climbing onto it.

He opens his mouth to greet her, when she silences him with a long, simple, soft kiss, his arms wrapped around her as she relaxes against him. As the kiss ends, she rests her head on his chest, arms wrapped around his chest as they fall asleep. Him, to the sound of her breathing, and she to the rhythm of his heartbeat. And before they drift off to peaceful slumber together, his eyebrow perks as she hears her whisper one single, definite word.

"*Mine."*

.

.

Really. Close, but no cigar. I would not put it past that decrepit old...man...to have an elaborate revenge based on annoyance. But really. He was only human. He was only petty.

Me?

I've gone beyond pettiness.

I let go of pettiness after what I survived at their hands.

My survival? Well, that was all another plan. The little digital

children were just enough for me to keep a little of myself around, even after everything.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Perhaps some introductions are in order.

Please allow me to introduce myself.

I'm an Angel of Wealth and Taste-

A blasted plain. A single spec, resembling the white, humanoid forms of the Evangelion MP series, finds itself standing in the desolate world it recognizes so well. It looks up, and in the distance there is the Mountain that Speaks with Thunder...but realizes it is not the distance, it is diminished, a shadow of what it what was.

"***I see he lives,***" Zeruel booms/whispers, "***Ever the parasite. Ever the disease. His own insanity has made him near impossible to cleanse from the world."***

A figure resembling a human but not human appears, overshadowing them.

"**Tabris?**"the diminished winged monster asks, "**What is this-**"

"Be silent," Kaworu says, the shadows of his other eyes surrounding his handsome face, "I suspected you had somehow cheated death once again, Iruel. And I am disgusted by how you have done so. Enough that you used the awakening of the Beast to detach yourself from your own creations, endangering their existence, but this...I am tempted to go with Zeruel's suggestion and destroy you in totality."

A light, in the sky. A faint outline appearing.

"**You disgusting little Lilim licker,**" Iruel growls, "**I'll wait this out and I'll urinate on your radioactive remains when the Lilim finish with you all. Do you think I am scared of you?**"

Tabris smiles. A bird of light appears in the sky, and the light shines down upon the Angel of Terror.

"**You will [Hello, (Damnation and {Disgusting sycophant} horrors) brother] be silent, Iruel [Loki (Coyote {Sammael})].**

You will be made to serve [serve (serve {serve us} our plans) Complimentation] the salvation of all our people."

And as the light of Truth shines down from Arael, the former, diminished Angel of Terror screams in horror as his truths are laid down before him. He screams for quite some time.

Tabris only smiles.

Chapter 74: Reconciliation

Consciousness replaces rage. Which in and of itself is puzzling- it never remembers consciousness. Has it never, in all the incarnations, known the sense of self? But in the last moment, as the target of {designation} Father's rage overwhelmed {ENTITY} Turel, she realized that she was not a tool, but a creature of consciousness and flesh and energy and broke off the attack and ran. She ran far and fast, and now she realizes she is no long in the air.

Of all the creations {designation} Father, the Cherubim are those that are swiftest to adapt. It is because of their nature. They are not made to live long, and as such they adapt swiftly to what is around them. But never before have the Children of the White Egg fought each other, and so she, multifaceted as she was made to be, began to...

…

...think.

She does not want to die.

She is a weapon, made to strike down those {designation} Father has chosen to be enemies of the White Egg, and *she does not want to die.*

A new form is chosen. Even though she senses that this world belongs to the Black Egg, she does not feel...fear...towards the entities she senses near the outstretched probe of her self form. Her Overmind dials down, becoming something of three dimensions through forward temporal momentum, and her mind stretches out.

I am Zophael.

The entity, the first of the black egg life to interact with her, stares at her.

What are you?

The fish does not get a chance to respond before the claw intercepts it, and the crab swims off with its kill. Perhaps, Zophael thinks, a more mentally advanced target is needed.

Chapter 74: Recollection

"Okay," Mana sighs, slapping her knees as the red light on the camera clicks on, "Fine. We've danced around the subject long enough. I guess we really need to do this, huh?"

Far from the sympathetic face of Kaji Ryoji, standing behind the camera this time is Gendo Ikari. His expression says nothing, reveals nothing, and gives no hint of the sympathy he no doubt feels for the girl. Instead, he only folds his arms and levels his glasses framed gaze upon her.

"Kirishima," he says, "What happened to Xavier Spencer?"

She sighs. In some ways, she's thankful for the Angel attack, because it kept her from having to tell the damned story.

"Alright," she says, "It started the day of the Cherubim attack. After me and Kaji were settled in and the techs poked and prodded my cyborg...parts...Spencer had me dressed up in full uniform to show off to potential buyers. Not buyers for me, since I was still under contract with NERV, but for future models like me."

Her knuckles crack, her fists balled on her lap.

"To make sure I didn't make a...scene...he remotely turned off my limbs to keep me immobile. Mainly so some interested buyers could...check out the merchandise."

Gendo nods.

"Who disabled Spencer's locks?"

Mana smirks, faintly.

"Shiro Tokita," she says, "He's the one who pretty much saved our asses."

...

A ventilation grate, somewhere around a mile underneath Tokyo-3, opens. Now, when speaking of something like a Geofront, 'a mile beneath the ground' would actually put one relatively close to the Geofront's surface, meaning that the ventilation grate is actually in the upper levels of the main NERV-1 facilities. In fact, the grate is set up near one of the exits onto the Geofront, allowing the girl with blue

hair and red eyes, in a white, green lined plugsuit with a 01 stamped on it to exit the sterile white hallway, a whicker basket under her arm as she greets the filtered daylight.

She waves to several NERV staff sitting at a picnic, who wave back. She knows them- hasn't talked to them, but knows them. She doesn't like to talk. When she talks, she gets the words wrong, and when she was growing up with her sisters that kept irritating Kei.

Little Mommy told her it was more Kei's problem than hers, but never in front of Kei.

Iti, the second oldest of the Ree, soon finds herself where she has usually spent her outside time over the past few weeks, at a small patch of flowers and plants near a small shack which serves as a home to someone. Sitting on her knees, she takes out the small hand shovel and a tupperware container, pouring rich black soil in it and staring at it before sealing it shut, and turns to a plant, clipping leaves and checking the fruit growing upon it.

"I was wondering who was tending my watermelon patch when I was in Vegas."

She turns. Less startled, more curious, to see a man in a ruffled suit and stubble, with a long black ponytail and with a piece of straw in his teeth as he approaches. Ryoji Kaji grins, hands in his pockets, as Iti rises, wicker basket held in her hands.

"Hey, I was looking for someone to chat with anyway," Kaji says, "Mind if I help? I could use an ear."

Iti nods with a smile.

"Okay."

...

"As you can see, the Mark 4 cybernetic enhancement package keeps your super soldier looking human. This allows them better infiltration strategies and makes them tactically, more valuable. As well, they come with overrides. Wave."

A force pulls at her arm, and her hand moves, from side to side even though she wills it not to.

Her entire body is stiff, unresponsive. A shunt in the wetware turns her into a mannequin. From Tokita's expression when Spencer activated it, she almost believed he didn't know about it.

"Fine, General, stop complaining. You can squeeze the mammaries."

"That wasn't the worst part," Mana says, stopping to sip her water, "I recognized a few of the people at Spencer's 'trade show.' I worked for a few of them."

Gendo nods.

"Warlords," he says.

She nods.

"Post Second Impact, a lot of those...gentlemen...set themselves up in countries neighboring Pakistan, down in southern Africa, and in Russia and carved themselves out little kingdoms. I was basically on display for the pieces of shit who made my childhood a living hell."

...

One.

ADAM, exploding in Antarctica, evaporating an entire continent with the force to shift the world on its axis.

Two.

The white giant in Terminal Dogma.

Three.

The Third Angel, exploding from within as Unit 00 shields the civillians.

Four.

Sachiel, core crushed in Unit-01's teeth.

Five.

The progressive knife in Shamsel's Core.

Six.

Gaghiel bisected and exploding.

Seven.

Ramiel, back blasted out like a suicide bullet.

Eight.

Jet Alone's hammer impacting Sahaquiel's Core.

Nine.

The Lance of Longinius slicing through Matariel.

Ten.

Sandalphon's Core exploding as the lightning dances through it.

Eleven.

Shalgiel's Core disintegrating from the Maser.

Twelve.

Iruel, dragged off by the Ree.

Thirteen.

Rampel torn apart by Go-kun's drill.

Fourteen.

Leliel exploding, white wings of light bursting from within.

Fifteen.

Shateiel exploding, the fake lance coring it.

Sixteen.

Raziel, torn apart by Unit-01 in its berserker fury.

Seventeen.

Zeruel, fallen.

When seventeen have fallen, it will be time. The time of joining. For the barriers between souls to cease.

In the darkness, red eyes open. Red, the color of blood.

"**It is time."**

...

The monitor shuts off as the finger numbly falls upon the power button. Forcing her jaw closed, Yui Ikari continues staring at the screen for a long few minutes, before she reaches over to Pieter and shuts his.

"What...did I just...watch?" Pieter asks.

Yui stares at the monitor, and picks up the DVD case the offending disc was sent in.

"Panty and Stockings in Garterbelt."

They both stare at the screen. Yui takes off her glasses and pinches her nose.

"Are the Ree putting something in the water at that studio?" he asks, "Or did we just choose the place that's just chock full of weirdos and perverts?"

"I...did that transformation sequence involve a *stripper pole?"*

He stares at the case. Blinks, stares again, before popping the dvd out of the monitor and closing the box.

"Yeah, maybe we should've chosen a company not full of deviants?"

"They're not all bad."

"Yui, you kicked the director in the balls after you found out Rei spent half of the series naked."

She nods, still pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Right," she says, leaning back in the theatre seat, "What happened with you and Kyoko, Pieter?"

He grunts. Like many sounds that come from him, it comes out more manly than intended, as he shifts in the seat and rests his head on his hand.

"I'm asking because I'm a friend," she says, "And for all her personality...quirks...I've come to see Kyoko and you as friends over these past few months. Something happened between the two of you, and I'm asking you to tell me. As a friend."

He stares at her for a long moment, before turning back to the screen.

"You don't fight fair."

"Pieter."

"Alright, alright," he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, "Kyoko and I had a fight. I told her why I kept...well, why I didn't do anything when we were down in Terminal Dogma, and she didn't react as...well...as I hoped."

He shifts in his seat, lips twisting, frowning and smiling at the same time.

"So, we talked," he says, "We cleared the air. We got some things off of our chests that've been a long time coming."

"And?"

The smile becomes wider as he leans back in the chair.

"And I asked Kyoko to marry me, again," he says, "And she said yes."

...

Kei Ayanami stares across the velvet draped bedroom, as if moving from the exact spot she stands on would cause her to descend into a fatal drop. Standing next to her, his face a blank slate, his normal jovial words dead on his lips, Kaworu Nagisa stares at his partner, his equal, his *girlfriend* (the thought causing a small upward tremor of his mouth) as she takes in the sight before her.

"Chairman Kihl," Kei says.

He nods, turning from her back to the bed, where the bedridden chess master sits still and silent, only the tapping of his finger against the handheld keyboard signaling the presence of life in his ancient form.

"*I see you have returned home, Miss Ayanami,*" the digital voice, a recreation of Kihl's own, booms in the bedroom.

"He suffered a stroke," Kaworu says, hands folded in front of himself, "He was not in his right mind. That may be the cause of his...actions."

"Which could never be caused by the fact that he's a miserable excuse for a human being."

Kei bites back the statement. That wasn't right. Wasn't proper. But then again, she hates the man in this room far more than she's ever hated anything. Ever.

"You can't choose your family," Kaworu says, "And this man is, like it or not, my father."

Hands clasp tighter, his knuckles white, and he turns and walks out. Staring at the man, the wasting remains of the man, Kei turns and follows. She follows Kaworu as he walks down the hallway, down the spiral stairway into the lobby.

She grabs his wrist, stopping him from walking out of the mansion, towards the labs he keeps on the far end of the estate, where the...thing...is.

"You are not him," she says, "No more than I am my mother."

His expression softens. His hand clasps around hers, and he nods.

"We are what defines us," he says, "Where we come from writes our story, but we write the ending."

An eyebrow raises. She tilts her head at him.

"Who wrote that?" she asks.

"I did. Right now," he says, and kisses her on the forehead, "Thank you."

...

"Mid way through the...show...Raziel went and...well, the Cherubim appeared. There had never been an Angel attack on American soil, and as out of it as I was, I could see that Spencer was panicking. So, he had me loaded up onto JAP, had its controls locked out and set to remote, and sent us to destroy the Cherubim, and if New Vegas gets glassed, well, all the better a show for his buyers, right?"

She shifts in her seat, biting her lip. She doesn't like being vulnerable. Doesn't like looking hurt, but the memories are still there. Still waiting.

"Kirishima," Gendo says, "Did he say anything else?"

She nods, folding her hands in her lap. Part of her wants to shout it, as the accusation it is. Part of her wants to keep it to herself. But, for once in her life, Mana goes down the road labeled sensible.

"He said, 'The Committee can go to Hell'."

Gendo nods. It is a simple motion, but enough that it is noticed on the normally stoic face that Mana notices it.

"Sir?"

"Continue," he says, "I understand that things quickly...went to seed?"

Mana smiles.

"Oh, Hells yes they did..."

"*Spencer!" Kaji yells, lunging at the older man, "You god damned maniac!"*

Xavier Spencer narrows his eyes, sidesteps the lunge, and brings down a knife hand between Kaji's shoulders, dropping the Inspector. Around him, three people appear, all in black, all whirring with their movements as they surround Kaji.

"Inspector," Spencer sighs, "It behooves us to behave in the presence of our guests."

He waves, indicating the dozens of uniformed men, most of whom Kaji recognizes from dossiers, files, and his own dark childhood.

"Guests my ass," Kaji growls, "You're selling this in the open now? Are you insane?"

"Of course I am," Spencer sighs, placing a boot on Kaji's chest, "I am insane. Constructively insane, of course. The Committee recognizes that, which is why I am on the Council. Do you honestly think this little outburst of yours solves anything, Mr. Kaji? Or do you forget that I hold all the cards here?"

Kaji grins.

"Well, not all of them."

A whirring from overhead, clattering in the ductwork.

"Oh gi~irls."

The vents shatter. Three forms descend, slamming into the ground, everyone taking a careful step back. Joints whirring, the three avatar bodies, fully sized replicas, stand up. Which is when everyone notices they are identical- all in the effigy of a teenage girl with red eyes and blue hair.

"Bluetooth connection achi~ieved," one girl sing songs, "Hey there! I'm Hatchi!"

"I'm Nana!"

"And I'm Siyon! And except for Mr. Kaji, you're all now our Special Friends!"

...

"So...no sex."

"No sex."

"Seriously. You're teenagers and you have agreed to *not* have sex."

On the couch, facing Misato, who is currently sitting on the coffee table, Shinji and Asuka both nod. Sighing, Misato folds her hands between her knees, leaning forward and sniffing both of them.

"So...you didn't even have a quickie before you decided this?"

"Misato!" Shinji yells, hand still intertwined with Asuka's, "We're teenagers, not...well, I can't think of a good analogy."

"You're still teenagers," Misato says, pointing to Shinji, "And *you* have a hot girlfriend. And you-"

She points at Asuka.

"Just got into a fist fight with the *Ree* for the priviledge of deflowering him. Again. So you've decided to not have sex."

They nod, Shinji's hand tightening around Asuka's.

"Mom's creepy voyeurism aside, she does have a point. We are only sixteen years old. We really might be too young for this, and now that I'm not exactly human, anymore, we don't know what side effects we might have if we did have sex."

Asuka nods.

"It was my i-idea," she responds, "I w-wanted to take some tests for Shinji b-before we decided on anything, and I f-found something weird."

Misato nods, motioning her to continue.

"I'm sterile," he says.

"Okay," Misato says, shrugging, "Well, since you're kinda an angel mule now, I guess that makes sense. So doesn't that mean you two can go at it like jackrabbits without little Shinjis and Asukas running around?"

"N-normally, that would," Asuka responds, "But I w-wanted to compare it to other data. So I got a sperm sample from Kensuke and Touji."

Misato stares at her.

"Rei p-provided it," Asuka responds, and shudders, "I d-don't want to know how. But I ran the samples through the same tests, and I found out *they* are sterile, to. I w-would say that there is a good chance that every boy in our class might be the same. But I don't know why."

...

"You said Tokita was responsible for saving you," Gendo says, "How?"

As Jet Alone Prime advances upon New Vegas, escorted by the massive bulks of the PAWN series, the Ree have managed to...befriend...most of the guests at Spencer's show. Save for Spencer himself, who now runs through the convention center he rented, hearing the giggles through the ductwork and the clattering footsteps overhead.

"Weeee~ee can seeeee you," the girlish voices whisper in unison.

He reaches into his duster, pulling out a massive revolver, aiming and firing at one of the ducts as he wipes the sweat off of his brow with a hankerchief.

"Where are you?" he demands.

Silence. Only distant laughter in the ducts, followed by yells and shouts from the show room and sounds of squeaky hammers meeting flesh. Spencer back paces, gun at ready, eyes wide and darting from side to side.

Turning to run, he comes face to face with the weaselly man, the man's face set and his mouth twisted in a snarl. Spencer tries to shout out the name, tell him to get the Hell out of his way, before Shiro Tokita's fist lashes out and catches Spencer in the nose, cartilage cracking before the head of NHIS drops onto his back, screaming.

"You son of a bitch," Tokita growls, "You insane f_ing bastard. They always said you were crazy, but I just never wanted to think you were this far gone."

Footsteps running down the hallway. Kaji skids to a stop in front of the scene.

"All I wanted to do," Tokita says, hands clenching and unclenching as Spencer skitters back, "Was build a robot. All I wanted to do! You brought me in to work on the Jet Alone Project and I thought that was it! NHIS was going to build giant robots, save humanity, and maybe, just maybe, kick off a technological revolution."

Kaji lowers his gun. He waits, arms folded, as Tokita advances and the normally implaccable Spencer cowers.

"But no," he says, "You had to be f_ing insane! You had to have people design lasers so you could carve your dick on the moon! You had to make robots based on god damn Chess! You had to f_ up everything because you're a god damned lunatic! Well, guess what, asshat! I can f_ things up, to!"

He reaches into his jacket, taking out a device resembling a PDA kitbashed with a walkie talkie.

"Tokita, what are you doing?" Spencer demands.

"I designed Jet Alone," he yells, "I let you take the damn credit because you funded me! Well, the problem is, I know it better than you do, and I built the back doors in Prime! All system locks released, recognize vocal authorization! Mana! Can you hear me?"

...

The lights in the pilot ball turn on. Mana gasps, feeling returning to her arms and legs, as the fuzz of the viewscreen clears, vitals and information played along her SUIT's visor.

"Biolink established. MEGAS: Online!"

"Mana!" Tokita's voice rings in her ears, "I've unlocked your wetware and turned your SUIT to full functionality! Kick their asses!"

Despite herself, Mana grins.

"F_ing metal."

JAP's AI, her soul, sings in union with hers. A mental command filtered through her chariot, and Jet Alone's hands grip around the hammer, before swinging into the face of one of the PAWNs and sending it stumbling backwards.

"Alright, boys!" she shouts, "Looks like it's Hammer Time!"

"And from there, that's pretty much where Go-kun got involved," Mana says, "JAP was totaled, but the AI was recovered and from what Asuka told me, the Ree transferred her into a Core, so she's kind of like Zwei now."

Gendo nods, closing the folder in his hand.

"What happened to Spencer?"

"He got away," she says, "I honestly don't know where to, but he couldn't have gone far. Kaji said he took a couple of bullets before his bodyguards snatched him, so hopefully that fucking dirtbag bled out, but who knows."

She sighs, folding her hands in her lap. She almost physically deflates, the tension draining out of her, the story finally told.

"So, is that it?" she asks, "JAP's gone, the AI's in a Core now, so what now? Do I get discharged? I'm pretty sure I can trust NERV to let me keep my cybernetics."

Gendo nods, pulling up a chair and sitting across from Mana.

"The intelligence of Jet Alone is now inside an Evangelion Core," he says, "Meaning that it can be installed into an Evangelion, and can be piloted by an Evangelion pilot."

Mana nods. Which is when Gendo opens the folder and hands it to Mana. A folder with her information, her picture, and the seal of the Marduk foundation on it.

"Welcome to NERV," he says, "Pilot. Mr. Kaji finalized your transfer from NHIS to NERV this morning. You're now officially transferred to his custody as his adopted ward, with all the rights and privileges thereof. I understand Mr. Tokita was quite agreeable to the terms, at least after Mr. Kaji took the gun out of his face."

...

Xavier Spencer has had better weeks. Following the cluster f_ of New Vegas and the diplomatic disaster that was him attempting to leave the country, his entire entourage was picked off one by one. Then he tried to access the Council and found that he was no longer one of them. Access codes changed, all his systems blocked from him.

Then, he found out why.

"You son of a-"

The gunshot rings out. Spencer never finishes the sentence, collapsing to a heap on the warehouse floor as the smoke wafts from the barrel and the old man stares impassively at the man who once considered a friend.

"My apologies," Kozou Fuyutsuki says, clicking the safety of the pistol back on, "But, as they say, 'Shit happens.'"

The lights shines down, the room dissolving into black, as he turns to find the monoliths appearing around him.

"Well done," 06 says, "With Spencer's elimination, that is the final loose end. Your two tasks are completed. Come and join your place on the Council of SEELE, Professor Fuyutsuki."

Kozou says nothing, taking the empty spot, as he disappears and the monolith labeled 05 appears, just as the spotlight shines down on Yui Ikari.

"You have five minutes to explain why there is a bounty on my son's head."

...

Night falls on Berlin. She waited for him to be asleep. They had dinner, they walked the garden. Her injuries are healing. She has full mobility, so she does not need to access her S2 organ, and can move about freely without him sensing it. Part of her is afraid; Kaworu is a Nephilem like her, and yet not like her. His angelic stock is of Tabris, the Angel of Free Will. But she knows he has never affected her. And he would not force her into doing this.

This, she must do.

She sneaks, silently, through the halls of the mansion. No one sees her. She is familiar with the corridors, finding her way to the second floor, where the bedroom is, where he is kept. Silently opening the door, she enters, softly padding towards the four post bed.

"*Ah, Miss Ayanami,"* Kihl's digitized voice crackles, "*To what do I owe this please?"*

"Chairman," Kei says, standing at his side, examining the monitors, the equipment keeping the man alive, "I wished to thank you. You have guided me well. It was wise of you to engineer events that ended up with me returning."

A digitized chuckle.

"*You are different. You idolize your mother, not your Mother. You have grown in these past months. I would say you have been an able student.*"

Kei nods.

"Kaworu will not kill you," she says, "He values you. He never says so, but sees you as a father and confidant. If he killed you, I think he would kill himself shortly after. He has more compassion than he thinks. I believe that, as it is, you will live for quite a long time under his care."

Silence, in the bedroom. The edges of Lorenz Kihl's lips twitch into a faint smile.

"*And you, Miss Ayanami?*"

"I think you have miscalculated the wisdom of bringing me back."

"*And why is that?*"

She smiles. A dangerous smile, not one of joy but of anger, directly sharpened like the edge of a blade.

"Because I am the only one of my sisters who has ever killed a human being."

She grabs the pillow from underneath Kihl's head, bringing it down onto his face. Mute struggles, Kei grabbing the handheld keypad out of his hand with her gloved hand before bringing both hands down onto the pillow. Labored breathing, from him, from her, as she watches the monitor, watches as the numbers tick down and the steady pulse becomes a silent line.

"Help," she softly calls out, "Oh dear. Help."

She props up the silent, lifeless head of the chess master, placing the pillow back under it before walking out. Phase one, done, she muses as she places the keypad back in Kihl's cold dead hand and walks out, padding her way through the mansion and finding herself in the bedroom, opening the door and entering it. He is sleeping, as she approaches, tightening her night robe around herself.

Leaning down, she brushes her lips against his forehead, golden red eyes opening and staring into hers.

"Kei?" Kaworu whispers, "What's wrong?"

"Sh," she admonishes, a finger to his lips.

He watches, transfixed, as her robe falls to the floor, followed by her nightgown, mouth open in surprise as she climbs onto the bed, shifting the covers to allow herself entry as she leans in and presses her lips against his own.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

She smiles, faintly.

"Giving you a choice."

He cups her face with his hands, pulling her close and pressing his lips against her own as the two teenagers, nephilem, lovers, retreat under the covers. And in the morning, when the attendant comes in to find them, still in their embrace, sleeping blissfully with their arms wrapped around each other and with an afterglow that, for some reason, seems to have a glow of its own, she almost leaves.

But, it is the stirring of the door and the light through the blinds that wakes Kaworu first, and allows him to hear the news that Chairman Kihl passed away in his sleep the night before. Kei sleeps through the whole thing, waking after the attendant leaves so she can comfort Kaworu. He has no cause to consider it anything but genuine.

And a new day dawns on Berlin.

Chapter 75: Dancing in the Moonlight Over Water

It called her. The voice. It called her. With the Angel destroyed and more important matters on everyone's mind, it was simple for her to find her way down to the Gate, past all the security, past level EE, all the way down to Terminal Dogma. It called her.

It called her.

In the back of her mind, she hears the song, like she has for all of them. But it is only when she hears the song that she finds herself in battle with them. It is this that makes her sad.

Does this mean she must now kill her mother? Her other mother, the one of whom she is sourced from, yet not raised by?

And yet, it called her, and she must come. More overpowering than previous times, she also comes out of curiosity, a very lilim trait. A very human trait. She stopped calling the lilim lilim when she was raised among them. Little Mommy was very good at that. Well, Little Mommy was very good at a lot of things with them. She remembers those trips to the other worlds, where she sees what she was like without Little Mommy, and she still does not talk about it.

Worlds without her sisters. Worlds where her father is a broken shell. Not this world, though.

But her thoughts lead her to the massive golden doors as they grind open. And Rei Ayanami, First Child, eldest of the Lilithian Nephilem, smiles in an ear to ear grin as the Gate to Heaven and the Room of Gauf opens, and she sees what has come.

"Heee~ey there," she says, "What'cha doin'?"

"**It is time.**"

And Rei opens her eyes to see them all. Her brother, Little Mommy and her father, all her sisters, Kei, Go-kun, and everyone reaching out to embrace her. And the walls outside Terminal Dogma are painted with yellow, as the solitary prisoner of Terminal Dogma makes her way to the main shaft.

To ascend, and begin the end.

"**It is time.**"

Chapter 75: Dancing in the Moonlight Over Water

She can hear them giggling as she walks towards the recreation hall on B17. She's confirmed that no one else is there, but Yui steels herself nonetheless, tapping the door control and letting the door slide open. Sitting on the couch, their textbooks on the table, Shinji and Asuka quickly move to opposite sides of the couch as Yui purses her lips and taps her sneaker clad foot.

"Well, then," she says, "Don't stop on my account."

Asuka turns bright red. Shinji groans.

"Mom..."

"Shinji, you're a responsible sixteen year old young man who knows how to make his own decisions," Yui says, "I should not have to veto your choices at all."

Shinji groans louder, and Yui smiles.

"Now," she says, "Shinji, Asuka, I think we should talk. About something not related to your relationship, but something the two of you should know. Do you have a few minutes?"

Shinji nods. Asuka checks her watch, and makes a squeaking sound, grabbing her textbooks and shoving them into her school bag.

"I'm s-sorry, but Mother n-needs me down in Project E," she says, "C-can this wait?"

Yui nods with a heavy sigh, as Asuka straightens her school uniform's skirt and runs out, her shoes tapping down the hall before the elevator closes behind her. Sighing again, Yui turns back to Shinji, who shrugs.

"What'd you want to talk about, Mom?"

"Some of the secrets I've been keeping," Yui says with a faint smile, "I made Asuka swear to secrecy on it, and it's been gnawing at me for a while. But, I want you both there to hear it."

Shinji nods, and turns back to his textbook as Yui exits.

...

Pacing the elevator, Asuka loses herself in thought. She is still mentally going over the results of that test. There are implications which she doesn't like. Does Dr. Ikari know? Does Mother know? They have to. Unless this is *recent*, like some sort of...wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Angel of the Unborn. Sandalphon. Hm. If it is that recent, within the past few months. But aren't the names of Angels arbitrary? Would Sandalphon's death actually have some sort of conceptual effect on humanity?

The doors open. She turns, walks down the corridor towards Mother's lab, and runs into Shinji. He smiles, cups her face with his hands as she feels a sudden, complete peace overtaking her.

"**It is time.**"

And the walls paint themselves yellow.

...

Maya taps her PDA, narrowing her eyes before she picks up her step, catching up to the two talking women. While Misato Katsuragi and Ritsuko Akagi have reconnected as friends these past few months-possibly bolstered by stories from Yui Ikari on the strain their relationship could have undergone on the other worlds they visited via the Angel Leliel, most of the topics seem to be the lesbian relationship Akagi and Maya currently have.

Which is not nearly as lesbian as it sounds like, as Misato believes they are 'doing it like the Bonobos' when in fact, they're not.

"Sempai," Maya says, Ritsuko turning to the sound of the affectionate nickname, "The MAGI just picked up something weird down in Terminal Dogma. There seems to be some sort of mobile Pattern Orange cycling through the base sensors."

The elevator doors on the far end of the base open. Standing in the cab, surrounded by the beige uniforms of what was once several NERV staff with a crimson orb floating in her hand, is a girl who looks much like a 14 year old version of Rei. As well, she is naked. And glowing.

"**It is time.**"

"Lilith," Ritsuko breathes.

"Get moving and tell the Commander," Misato says, reaching into her bomber jacket and yanking out her gun, "Run!"

Ritsuko grabs Maya by the wrist, running down the corridor as Misato opens fire. The bullets pass through the girl, evaporating against her skin as she advances. She reaches out, her hand passing before Misato's eyes, and she sees him. The older man, the face so much like Kaji's, the hard eyes and jawline and the unspoken words.

"Dad?" she asks.

"**It is time.**"

And then she also remembers Mom walking out and Dad looking at her like a god damned burden. With a yell, Misato swings, powered by years of pent up anger and rage, shattering the image of her father and slamming her fist against Lilith's nose. To her credit, the avatar of the Second Angel goes flying back, landing on her bare ass in the elevator cab, Misato slamming the floor button for Terminal Dogma and forcing the doors closed before she takes off down the hall, after Ritsuko and Maya.

...

Are you happy?

Blue eyes open. The world around her swims, forming along the basis of her psyche. Freed from the confines of flesh and blood, the soul finds the world its plaything, given a peace and piece of reality that it never imagined possible. The psyche that is Asuka Langely Sohryu, daughter of Kyoko and Pieter, sister of Uriel and Mari, finds herself floating in the ether, as the world around her forms into a great green field and she finds herself sitting on a picnic blanket.

Blinking, she looks up, looks down. Everything seems...peaceful. And

yes, not so much. Memory swims, drifting, as Asuka sits up. The world shifts, the sun shining down like a spotlight, and the shadows of people dance around her as the reality shifts to her needs.

Are you happy?

The voice promises her many things. A happy childhood. A perfect mother and father. Love, affection, and freedom from need and want. A fifth birthday without her mother berating her for believing the dog was real, a twelfth birthday without her beating herself with a belt, a life where she did not prostrate herself to a parent's needs. All it asks for is submission.

"Not here," she says, "No."

A pause in the invisible voice. And when Asuka looks to her side, she sees the stuffed doll with four green eyes and ragged red hair sitting next to her, and she smiles.

"*So, Asuka,"* Dollie says, "*What do we need to do first?"*

"We need to find Rei," Asuka says with a smile.

Dollie tilts her head, green eyes closing with a smile.

"*I always said you're a smart girl."*

...

The doors open, and Shigeru Aoba can only stare at the opening elevator cab as the two technicians standing in front of it explode into an orange spray. Standing in the mess, a growing globe of red in her hand, the girl resembling Rei stares at Shigeru with a look that burns to the very depths of his soul.

"**It is time."**

With a scream starting all the way from his balls, Shigeru runs, pumping arms and legs as he speeds down the corridor, hearing the buzzing of bees as the slow marching is followed by the sounds of people popping like overfilled water balloons.

"It is time."

He turns the corridor. The girl is there, staring at him. The world around her shifts, and Shigeru sees the vision before him, of the shifting darkness finding that which would bring him peace and surrender. It never gets to that, however, before Shigeru screams and runs back down the corridor, turning another corner as he continues his flight from the girl.

And straight into a gaggle of red eyes staring back at him. The faces, pale and with red eyes, framed by blue hair, converge upon him, as Aoba finds his back against the corner of the corridor, screaming, clawing at his eyes as the ethereal giggle fills his ears, hands reaching out as the darkness overtakes him-

"Huh," Hatchi says, "He went down waaa~ay too easy."

"I kno~ow," Nana responds, "I thought he'd, y'know, run and maybe set off booby traps and stuff."

The six Ree, standing in front of the unconscious form of Shigeru Aoba, shrug, voicing their discontent that they didn't even get the hapless Bridge Bunny to soil himself before he passed out.

"**It is time.**"

And all six Ree squeal in delight as the girl passes them before they burst, painting the walls-and the unconscious Aoba-yellow with fresh LCL as their souls join the growing egg in her hand.

...

She continues. It is puzzling, the information wrong. Sifting through the memories of those she has granted completion to, she sees errors. Seventeen Angels have fallen by the Lilim, but it seems...odd. Wrong. She sees them differently. She sees them acting in ways that Angels, the children of the White Egg, should not act. Shifting through the memories of the First Child, she finds the inconsistencies puzzling.

She needs more. She needs to see the lives of those who also stand at the center of the Instrumentality.

She needs more.

She needs to see more lives, more memories. Entering the next corridor, she finds herself entering Dogma, where there would be

others. Entering the lowest level of the expanse, she stops, pausing at the sounds of the whirring. The first turret fires, enveloping her in flame and black smoke, which does nothing. Walking through the barrage, she sees him. *Him.* Servicemen, Section 2, keep firing with automatic weapons, bullets dissolving upon her as the automated defenses continue to hammer at her to no effect.

A wave of her hand, and their souls join the sphere in her hand, as she ascends Dogma, towards the platform which he does not occupy. Instead, he stands alone, now, in the empty control center, standing at the station his subordinates would usually take as he aims a single pistol at her.

"Commander," Lilith says, "**It is time.**"

"Like Hell," Gendo growls, cocking the gun, "Give me back my *daughters."*

Lilith tilts her head. She begins walking towards him, and he fires. The bullet, she realizes, is different. She senses the material around it, the black metal crafted with the same properties as the Lance, as it pierces her field and her shoulder. Gasping, she looks down at the wound, as the bullet leaves her shoulder through the back. Walking forward, she studies his reaction as she reaches out, and wraps both hands around the Commander's neck.

And a gentle squeeze, and the clothes of the Commander of NERV fall empty to the floor, in the expanding puddle of LCL.

She must consider this.

"It is time."

...

He feels it, like a pulling at the back of his mind, back of his head. The calling that seems to sing from his soul, that makes him straighten up on the couch as the alarms start blaring all over the base. Yui checks her PDA first, face going pale, the television in the rec room showing the image of the girl as she walks through the corridors, people exploding into LCL as she passes.

"Oh dear God," Yui whispers, "Lilith."

Shinji stares at the image, the image so much like Rei. Then he sees the video replaying, just in time to watch Asuka get absorbed by her and disappear in a geyser of LCL.

...

The cries of those around them as the girl continues her march through NERV echo through the halls. The only thing Misato sees, though, is the video feed on her PDA. Of Asuka, exiting the elevator, before the girl approached her. And then, the girl she's come to see like her own daughter exploding in a geyser of orange.

She follows the abruptly ending screams to find her. No sense of guilt or anger or even maliciousness on the girl's face. As if what she is doing- ending the lives of countless individuals- is the most perfectly normal thing in the world.

"Hey," Misato says.

The girl who looks like Rei turns to her, tilting her head slightly.

"Are they dead?" Misato asks. There is an edge to her voice. A tremble that seems to draw out as the girl stares at her.

"They are at peace," she says, "Not dead. But they will not return to you."

"So they're alive?"

The girl nods.

"Can they come back?" Misato asks.

"If they wish to. They will not wish to return."

Misato smirks. Sliding off her bomber jacket, she folds it neatly, walking to the empty security desk, a NERV uniform hanging off of it, and carefully places it on the table. Cracking her knuckles, Misato begins walking towards the girl, baring teeth.

"We'll see about that."

And the walls paint themselves yellow, the girl staring at the discarded black dress and boots before her. And Lilith continues on.

...

Rising from the picnic blanket, Asuka looks up as the sky shifts to night. Instinctively, she knows that in the sky, there are not stars. Instead, the twinkling lights, growing each minute in number, are also those that have been sublimated by Lilith.

"*It seems like a lot, doesn't it?"* Dollie asks.

"It does," she says, and faintly smiles, "But we're going to save them all."

"*How, Asuka?"*

"With help."

She clenches her free hand into a fist. She can see them, the ones she has known were all still there. Ones she's tried not to bring out over the past few months. The Inventor. The little girl. The growing army in front of her, all with her face, and its head is a girl identical to her, save in Uri's plugsuit.

"So," the Great Asuka Langely Sohryu says, "About time you called in the calvary."

Asuka tilts her head, blinking.

"I thought you were Lilith," she says.

"Kind of," her plug suit wearing counterpart responds, "She brought me out. I decided to stay. What do you say we go and fuck up God?"

...

Ritsuko and Maya have been sent with Shinji out of NERV, sent to Tokyo-3 above ground to direct efforts from there, and call down a nuclear strike if needbe. She stayed behind. She has work to do. Standing in Cage 3, Yui pumps the shotgun, hearing the sickly popping sounds as the doors to the cage open and Lilith's avatar, the mirror of her daughter, enters.

"**It is time.**"

Yui answers by squeezing off a blast, the shells melting against Lilith's

field as Yui backs up, the metal underneath the red sphere Lilith now travels upon warping. Firing again, and again, she continues backing up, the great shadow of the immobile Unit-01 covering her as the final round fires off and the shotgun clicks.

Looking up, Yui sees Lilith in front of her. A glowing white hand reaches out, touching her cheek, as Yui's breath catches in her throat, the world around her growing dim and peaceful and serene

And then snapping back as an octagonal field of orange light appears between her and Lilith.

A baleful yellow glow bathes the world around them. Lilith looks up just in time to hear the bestial growl, just in time to hear the deafening shrieks as restraint tear and the shadow moves in time with an arm rising.

"**GET AWAY FROM MY MOMMY!"**

And then Unit-01's fist comes down upon Lilith's avatar, slamming her through the catwalk, through the sea of bakelite and LCL, and through the floor itself.

Yui looks up as the mouth restraints tear and Unit-01...and *Ichi* roars, as Lilith floats back up in time for the giant purple hand to grab the girl and slam her into the far wall, carrying them both out of the Cage. As the red sea drains through the hole forced upon the bottom, Yui can only watch as her daughter engages an entity they could count on to end the world in single combat.

"That's my girl!"

...

It has taken a long time for Asuka to see herself as a person, much less value herself as a person. In the time before, in the time she was a child, from her first moments realizing how little her mother once valued her and from that reconciliation she and Kyoko Sohryu shared, she saw herself as something...less. But she still knew she wasn't worthless. So, her psyche created new branches to give her the reassurances her mother couldn't.

In time, those branches faded, only a handful reaching prominence. But they are all there, reaching out with her to the blood red stars that

are the other souls Lilith has gathered into the Instrumentality, to take them, reassure them, bring them back.

"Well, and here I thought I'd have trouble finding you."

On the green field, Asuka turns just as Misato pulls her into a bear hug, breathing into her strawberry hair as more red stars join the sky.

"Misato?" Asuka asks, "What are you doing here? Did she get you?"

Misato nods.

"I came here to save you, kid," she says with a smirk, "But it looks like you've got it well in hand. What's the plan?"

...

They carry out of the Cages, into the vehicle hangar, and Lilith extends her soul to grab a VTOL and slam it into Unit 01's face, the exploding fuel spraying the eye shields with fire, blinding the beast temporarily.

Unit 01 howls, fist slamming into and through the hastily thrown up shield, shattering it into orange feathers before Lilith floats back, standing upon the red sphere as she studies the advancing, berserk form of her other half. Looking inward, she peers into the souls of those that have joined her, looking to see the memories. She looks inward, to peer into the mind of the Commander.

And does not see what she expected to see. She does not see the death and despair.

She does not see the abandonment or the years of subterfuge and self hate. She does not see him hating his own son like she expected, or his manipulating those around him into a stew of neurosis.

This is wrong. *This is wrong.* And Lilith looks up just in time for the howling Unit 01 to grab her and start repeatedly slamming her into the hangar wall.

...

It did not take Gendo Ikari a long time to figure out where he was, or

what had happened to him. So, he crawled out of the bed, which for some reason was occupied with Yui, both Akagis, and most of the female bridge staff, snapped his fingers, and ended the fantasy. Now, he's for some reason in his uniform in a snow bank, just in time to receive a snowball to the face.

"Well, crap. I was honestly not expecting you to drop by."

Gendo looks up. An older man, as always in his white lab coat, reaches out a hand. The man is a mirror image of his son, save for the white hair being shorter and other peculiarities about him which Yui found charming and Nana and Hatchi found worthy of worship. Well, that, and his ability to create ridiculously powerful weapons for NERV.

"Dr. Mondschein, I presume?"

The head of NERV-Alaska and man lost to the mini Instrumentality that consumed the base grins.

"Good to see you, Commander. Does this mean NERV-1 broke reality?"

...

The wall gives way, and Lilith is sent flying through the rent sheets of metal, bouncing along the flooring from the impact, the final strike from the Evangelion still ringing in her ears. This is wrong. This is *very* wrong. She sought to take the soul of Yui Ikari, to find out why things were different, why they were *wrong* and get the answers she needed but Yui was not of the Evangelion.

How can her other half operate so freely?

Her attempts to bring the soul of Unit 01 into herself fail, blocked by the ego of the evangelion. The soul within is not Yui Ikari. The soul within is not alone, either. She reaches out, trying to welcome it, but is answered only by a massive purple fist that sents her flying back, into the center of a T corridor, her back slamming against the metal wall.

"There!"

A boy with red eyes and strawberry hair approaches. She reaches out, to welcome him. But something about him seems familiar.

"*Nagisa,*" she says.

But, that is not possible. How can the Final Angel still live? She expands her overmind, so tightly constrained to this flesh, and the confusion only mounts. A girl, with glasses and a face much like Sohryu's, but possessing a form and power she recognizes as Ramiel approaches from another corridor, eyes flashing before a beam of violet force slams into her own shields, hammering them down.

Two AT Fields pin her, the light of her own soul unable to sublimate that of the children of the White Egg.

Lilith. It seems we have much to discuss.

Sandalphon, another Angel that should be dead, floats down before her, mouth tendrils flickering. And with him, two others. First, a woman who looks like Sohryu, yet older. And the second one with them causes a small smile to appear on her face, despite the situation, despite how different he looks than what she knows he should look like.

"**Ikari**."

Shinji looks to Uri, nodding as he walks past Kyoko, standing in front of the pinned Lilith.

"Give them back."

...

"I've realized something, Misato. Lilith wouldn't have just taken me, because she knows me, by now. She knows what absorbing me would have done to Shinji, or you, and that would have caused this to fail."

The the red stars above shift and the ground beneath them begins to turn red, Misato nods.

"And what'd you realize?" she asks.

"That this Lilith isn't the same Lilith," Asuka responds, "Lilith is fragmented, but that kind of makes sense. If this is the same being that gave birth to humanity, doesn't it make sense that she's as fragmented and all over the place as we are? If we're basically here best creation, doesn't that mean that she make us in her image?"

"And put two humans in the same room, and you get fifteen different viewpoints," Misato says with a chuckle, "At least. Makes sense."

...

Surrounded by the enemy, Lilith, the avatar of Lilith, looks past them and stares at Shinji. They do not matter to her. They are not worthy of her attention, even if she could draw them into Instrumentality. But he...

He would have the answers.

He always has the answers.

"**Ikari.**"

"Give them back, Lilith," Shinji says, teeth grinding, "Give them back, right now."

...

Why do you persist?

The world turns dark. Misato is gone, her other selves gone, and Asuka finds herself standing in a spotlight, in front of the pale girl who looks like Rei but is not Rei.

"Why do I p-persist?" Asuka responds, "Because this isn't real."

It can be as real as you want it to be. You can be happy.

The eyes glow, so calm and comforting. Part of her just wants to lose herself in them, wrap herself in that joy.

"But it won't be," she says, "I l-leave everyone if I stay here. I c-can't leave them."

The figure tilts her head.

You can leave them. You can make them happy. You can't make them happy. In the end, they will always leave.

Asuka smiles, faintly. Humming to herself, hands folded behind her,

she leans in, face inches from Lilith's own.

"Iruel tried this," she says, "And I'm r-really getting tired of you people getting into m-my head. Rei?"

"*Heee~ey.*"

A white fist slams into Lilith's jaw, breaking the illusion. And Asuka and Misato find themselves surrounded by seven beings of purest white light, all with red eyes and wings reaching up into the sky. As the light clears, seven familiar laughs echo, and Asuka finds her hand surrounded by Rei's as she pulls her to her feet.

"Yeah, Big Mommy's having a bad day," she says with a smile, the light coalescing into their plugsuits as the sky begins to shake and bleed, "And the whole reality's kinda going boom. Any ideas?"

"I'm kinda agreeing with Rei," Misato responds, "I'm thinking everyone here's panicking, and we need some sort of concerted effort. Plan?"

Asuka grins, taking Rei's hand and Misato's, as the ground gives way to sky.

"We lead," she shouts, "By example!"

...

"I wish I could come back," Mondschein says, "I honestly do. But my physical body is gone and caput. From what I can tell, Instrumentality is a shared dimension, which is the only reason we're even able to talk, right now. As long as you're here, we can exchange info, and from what I can see, this is something you have to know."

As the snowball fight rages outside, the two sip their hot cocoa, and Mondschein draws in the air with his fingers, making a sphere.

"Instrumentality is a sort of shared dimension," he says, "Time is relative, there. Think of reality as a game server, and Instrumentality is a beta or admin server that maintains everything else. Only administration would have access to it, but if there's a glitch, such as, say, a progenitor-level being deciding to go sickhouse on the planet, people who aren't supposed to be there get access to it."

Sitting next to Mondschein, the man sized version of Evangelion 04,

also lost at Alaska, nods and sips his cocoa.

"**That's pretty trippy, Dad.**"

Gendo blinks, staring at the Eva.

"You never met Quatre," Mondschein explains, "We sort of were testing out AI algorithms and a tweaked version of Synthesis on him. We got Quatre."

"**Yo.**"

...

Reaching into her lab coat, Kyoko walks up behind Shinji and presses the handgun against the back of his head. Lilith shows an emotion. Fear, for the first time.

"I've figured out that Shinji is important to you," Kyoko says, "And that's why, despite the power you possess, you haven't blown through Mari, Uri, and Junior to get your claws on him. So, we're going to chat."

Lilith tilts her head, staring at the woman. Trying to place her.

"My name is Kyoko Sohryu," she says, "I am the mother of the girl you absorbed. Give her back, or I splatter Ikari's brains all across the hallway and you do not get him, ever."

Lilith's mouth opens and closes, her red eyes wide.

"**She is at peace. She will not return.**"

Kyoko pulls back the hammer. Shinji, for his part, does not flinch.

"Last chance," he says, "Give. Them. Back."

...

First Lieutenant Tasha Morris was having a good day. She got to work on time, filed all her reports with Section 1, and then the elevator doors opened and she found herself in some sort of limbo. But, that

ends, as the hand reaches out and she finds herself staring at the face of the Second Child.

Throughout the Instrumentality, those freshly brought in find themselves brought out of the limbo and perfect worlds, either by the Second Child or by the gaggle of girls resembling the First Child. Red star after red star vanishes, replaced by a person, brought in by the embrace of another, as the pillar of light that is the center of the Instrumentality begins to shudder, the illusion of a perfect world giving way to the roiling chaos that is the true face of existence.

Second Lieutenant Kira Hoshi finds himself brought out of something resembling a perfect dream.

Lieutenant Megumi Aoi was having the weirdest dream about being a power mad bitch trying to take over NERV, and was brought out of it by Rei.

All throughout, the Instrumentality loses more and more souls, as the human chain formed by Asuka grows larger and larger, as the world around them collapses.

And Gendo Ikari looks up as the sky splits open, taking a quick glance at the notes Mondschein has written down. He shouldn't be able to read in a dream, but he knows this is not a dream.

"You're sure you can't come?" he asks.

"Positive," Mondschein says, "How's Adam and Allison?"

"Under our protection," Gendo responds, "If it helps, Adam did hit an Angel with a car. Saved Shinji's life."

Quatre gives a thumbs up.

"**Awesome.**"

A pale hand wraps around his wrist, and the world fades into the raging red storm. At the center of it, keeping them all together, Asuka's hands wrap tighter around Misato and Rei's.

"Hold on!" she shouts, "Everyone, hold on! Right here, right now, we need each other like we never have before!"

Red eyes open in the sky.

"You heard me, Lilith!" Asuka shouts, "There is something beyond the

individual! We prove that every day, but it's escaped you! You think you can take away our pain, but it doesn't work that way! Yes, we hurt. Yes, we suffer. But it's through that suffering that we know what the joy is!"

...

Lilith takes a step back, as if struck. Red tears run down her cheeks, staring at the sphere as it rises out from underneath her.

"**How?"**

"Life is hard," Asuka yells, "And yes, we sometimes hurt each other! But by pretending others don't exist, you only hurt yourselves! It's only together that we accomplish anything! It's only when we acknowledge each other that our world has any meaning! And the only way you can stop running away and stop walling off everyone around it-"

Her grip on Rei and Misato becomes tighter, fingers intertwining, warping together.

"*Is by making connections instead of barriers!"*

The foundations warp and shudder, the pillar that holds it all together cracking.

"I can't say how this will end," she whispers, "But I can promise this. We'll face it *together-"*

...

The ball erupts, a pillar of white lancing through the base and blasting through the Geofront itself. Averting their eyes, the light overtakes all of them, sublimating all of Tokyo-3 in a expanding disc of red. Rising from it, those who could see it, who were outside the boundaries of Tokyo-3 itself, could see a being of light, resembling one Asuka Langely Sohryu, rising from the disc itself, a sphere of blood red in her hands.

It was only for a split second, but her face was one of pure

contentment, pure joy. And then, the sphere cracked, and she was gone.

And a t-shaped corridor in NERV-1 becomes a lot more populated, as several NERV employees who were less than an hour ago forced to join an impromptu collective find themselves restored to life.

And all of them naked.

Blinking, Asuka finds herself standing, the sudden cold under her toes cluing her in to the fact that she is not wearing anything. Shrieking, her mind locks up between covering her privates or covering her back, but both are solved by Kyoko draping her lab coat over her shoulder before pulling her daughter into a hug, kissing her on the forehead with a sigh.

"Good girl," she whispers.

Asuka smiles, resting against her mother, shoulders deflating as the events of the day leave her like a physical thing, just as Misato pats her on the back and Shinji runs over, purposely averting his eyes from his naked guardian and pulling Asuka into an embrace which also includes a deep, hard kiss.

"You have no idea how I was freaking out," he whispers.

Asuka smiles back, resting against him.

"Well, that's concluded."

Shinji turns, relieved to hear the voice, and promptly goes paler than normal as he realizes that his father is now complete naked. And standing in front of him.

And possibly also the hairiest man he has ever seen.

"Holy crap," Misato mutters, rubbing her eyes, "Hey, someone want to find us some clothes or..."

A lab coat hits Gendo in the face, knocking him onto his ass as the sneakers clap on the floor.

"Hide your shame," Yui says, and turns to Kyoko, "Kyoko, were you going to shoot my son in the *head?"*

Kyoko sighs, aims up, and shoots a suction head dart onto the ceiling.

"Amazing how lifelike these things are," she says, holstering the toy gun, "And we have a more pressing matter. What are we going to do with her?"

And in the center of the t corner, Lilith has already sat down, arms wrapped around her knees. This is wrong, she thinks. This is very, very, wrong.

...

Shigeru Aoba has been running. People have been exploding, painting the walls yellow, as the horror has been following them. Following him. And now, he is cornered, hiding underneath the desk in Central Dogma, just as he feels their breath. Turning, the gaggle of pale, naked girls with blue hair and red eyes giggle as they converge on him, crawling towards him with murder in their eyes as he closes his eyes and screams.

"Girls!"

They stop, and turn, to see Mari tapping her foot.

"Sorry," Rei says, "We were only playing."

Mari points to the elevator and the locker rooms, as the Ree file out, leaving the passed out Aoba. For now.

Chapter 76: Beach Episode

The sealed room deep within NERV, one level above Sheol, has a single prisoner. Her name, she insists, is Lilith. Which in and of itself is slightly odd, as that makes her distinct from Lilith, which according to all the sensors they have is still pinned to the bottom of the LCL lake in Terminal Dogma, and whom the Ree confirm is not the exact same being as the one sitting in the room, now thankfully dressed as she physically appears to be fourteen.

What they do know is that, yesterday, she emerged from Terminal Dogma and in quick succession consumed Rei, Asuka, the Ree, the Commander, Misato, and several technicians and Section 2 staff. Thanks to the actions of Ms. Sohryu, everyone was recovered and Lilith promptly surrendered herself.

Why, they don't know. But it was very possible she did not want to go several rounds with a pissed off Unit 01, which ended its self imposed period of isolation to defend her Mommy.

"So," Ritsuko says, standing in the doorway to the isolation cell, "Lilith. How are you different from the one down stairs?"

Lilith blinks.

"Dr. Akagi," she says, her voice level, emotionless, "It is not time. Seventeen have fallen, but it is not time. The set scenario of [designation] covenant has been altered."

...

Okayama, several hours away. She has decided on physical form, taking the form of, of all things, the {lifeform} Lilim. Observing via nanoscale probes, she watched them, the greatest so creations of the Black Egg, watching how they moved, frolicked, and followed several into lavatories to figure out reproduction and waste removal.

Taking the form of a lilim of slightly less than maturation age with red hair, and casting some material around it into a piece of clothing one is common to wear on the land/water border, she emerges from the sea. Already, something has come to greet her. It is large, and round.

"I am Zophael," she says, "What are you?"

Her answer is the beach ball hitting her in the face, the first thought going through her mind something along the lines of *gee they are friendly* right before unconsciousness takes over and she collapses.

Grabbing the ball, the pale girl with red eyes and blue hair bends down, waving her hand over the unconscious girl, as Shinji and Uri run up to her.

"Is she dead?" Uri asks, "Has Ayanami taken her first life?"

"No," Shinji responds, glowering.

"Well, then," the german pilot says, and shrugs, "Well, the day's young."

Chapter 76: Beach Episode

Following the near extinction of mankind at the hands of Lilith (which didn't get that far, anyway), straws were drawn and decisions were made. Mana decided to stay behind because they wanted to run some tests, and Mana insists she would sink if she went swimming. So, Shinji, Asuka, Mari, Rei, Zyuu, and Uri, along with Shinji and Asuka's three friends from school, headed to Okayama to the beaches there, with Yui, Maya, and Misato chaperoning.

This was, all in all, a good idea, all considering. That was what Yui defended stress relief as, even as she explained to Maya that Rei normally should not be able to knock people out with beach balls. Well, the girl wasn't hurt, and they were trying to find who she was as she convalesced underneath a beach umbrella.

The problem was, of course, what Dr. Ikari did not see coming. In this case, one of said things said scientist does not see coming is somewhere in Kyoto-2, at a GEHRIN lab underneath the city, where a single tube with a male nephilim is sitting.

Which is right when said nephilim opens his eyes, breaks out of the tube, and slaughters everyone in the lab before taking off towards Okayama.

...

Opening her second beer can of the day, Misato Katsuragi surveys her temporary kingdom, her floral skirt blowing in the wind and buttoned, sleeveless shirt already down three buttons due to her f_ing with Shinji's friends. She surveys her charges. The girl she sees as her daughter, the boy who's saved their lives more times than they can count, most of their elite piloting corps.

And a 60 meter tall purple cyborg kneeling over the beach, gently blowing steam out of its nostrils.

"Okay," Misato says, "Why'd we bring Unit 01?"

Hands in her sweat pants pockets, her long coat blowing in the shore breeze, Yui shrugs.

"Plausible deniability," she says, "Mainly, so if our funders ask us why we took a beach day, we can say it's to test out Unit 01's S2 organ. Besides, after Ichi acted so well when Lilith attacked, I figured she deserved a day at the beach."

Misato chuckles, slapping Yui on the back.

"Never change, Yui."

...

Asuka refuses to wear a swimsuit. Shinji knows why, of course. He's seen the scars, most importantly right before their trip to New Vegas, where they spent the night together. He...well, he tends to surprise her with stuff like that. Asuka's cheeks turn red, a small smile crossing her lips. For someone who not only had no experience and was also hesitant to cross that bridge, that one time he showed quite a bit of...skill.

But that is one of the things that brought them together. No matter what came up, no matter what dark, ugly things were aired about her, he accepted them. He did not give up on her. She still remembers his lips tracing down the scars on her back, still feels the tingle up her spine as she looks down at the girl. She has red hair, maybe a year younger than her, her head resting on the lap of her black skirt. It is her favorite dress, the one with the black and the blue shirt. The same one she wore when she came over from Berlin on the *Over the Rainbow*, where everything started.

Her time in Instrumentality has made her nostalgic, for some reason. Almost losing her identity makes her wonder what her memories include, what her identity is.

The girl stirs. Since the swimsuit they found her in wasn't something Yui thought of as decent, they dressed her in a spare button shirt Hikari had laying around to keep her warm. The girl opens blue eyes, staring up at Asuka. It is around then that Asuka realizes the girl looks a lot like her.

"I am Zophael," she says, "Who are you?"

"My n-name is Asuka," Asuka responds, "Are your p-parents here?"

Zophael's eyes go wider, and she sits up, staring at Asuka. Well, she sits up a little too fast, which causes her to groan and collapse back onto Asuka's lap.

"Maybe we should try that again," Asuka sighs.

Her mind swims, the Overmind reaching out. *Asuka.* The name comes to forefront, recognizing the name of the person she modeled her appearance after. The [directives] of the {purpose} tell her the (actions) that they are tasked with by [ENTITY] Father.

Names, faces.

Asuka, one of them.

One of the ones [ENTITY] Father hates

That He wishes to die to suffer to {burn}.

…

…

…

…

Why?

…

Ever since he came back from Germany, Shinji has been keeping his distance from Uri. If he's ever in the same enclosed space with him, he makes sure they're not alone; Misato, Asuka, or especially Dr. Sohryu always serve as nice buffers, just in case Uri decides to have a 'chat' with him. He has no way of knowing if Uri knows, yet.

"Ikari!"

Thankfully, walking with Uri is a girl with blonde hair in pigtails which are entirely too cute for a sixteen year old, and in a flowery summer dress which is appropriate considering how f_ed up the weather is post Second Impact. Annette waves, smirking with the same smirk she has worn ever since Mom explained to Shinji that the girl he saw hanging off Uri's arm was, in fact, the cousin who made visits to Uncle Tomoe and Aunt Alicia's a Special Hell.

"Uri," Shinji says, hands thrust into the pockets of his swim trunks, "Annette. What's up?"

A whistle in the distance, and they see Yui, standing on the crouching Unit-01's shoulder.

"I'll see what Aunt Yui wants," Annette says, patting Uri on the shoulder, "Play nice."

She skips off, Shinji glancing from side to side as Uri watches her go.

"She acts differently around you," Uri says, and sighs, "But, she helped me when no one else could. But I tend to talk about that far too much."

Shinji nods, tapping his foot. Yep, exactly what he's been trying to avoid for the past few weeks- alone with Uri. Alone with his girlfriend's overprotective Angelic brother.

"Okay," Shinji says, "So. What do you need?"

Uri blinks, stares at Shinji...and laughs, arms folded over his barrel chest as he blinks solid red eyes.

"I know, we have not had the chance to talk," Uri says, and shrugs, "We've been busy. I wanted you to know that I have no problems."

Shinji nods, shoulders sagging.

"With...me and Asuka?"

"Yes," Uri responds, reaching out and placing a hand on Shinji's shoulder, "I've caught up on everything that Mother's told me. Thank you for being there for my sister. I know *everything,* and I approve."

Shinji nods, visibly relieved, patting Uri on the shoulder.

"Uri, that means a lot," he says, "I'm glad you approve, to. I was worried that you'd be upset when you found out Asuka and I slept together."

Uri's eyes go wide. His face turns bright red as his stare turns into a heated, quivering stare, the veins popping into existence on his forehead. Well, Shinji thinks, maybe Dr. Sohryu left out that little nugget of information.

"Whoopsie."

...

A giggle. Fingers fumbling in the darkness, trying to unhook the top of her swimsuit and failing, as dexterity was never Touji's strong point. Hikari and Touji chuckle, the darkness of the cave near the beach giving them privacy and anonymity, allowing them to do their deeds without anyone checking up on them.

Well, anyone but Rei, or Rei's sisters, or their various little siblings, but they left them back in Tokyo-3, so that's less they have to worry about.

"We've got, like, the heads of NERV right outside," he says with a low chuckle, stealing another kiss from his girlfriend, as she tries to work the string to his swim trunks, "What if Dr. Ikari walks in."

"We tell her to wait outside until we're done," she responds, voice low, husky, hungry...and then squeaks when she hears the skitter nearby.

"Ah, crabs," he says.

"Crabs?"

"Yeah, *crabs,*" he sighs, fumbling on the floor, finding the flashlight, "Yeah, they're more scared'a us than we are of them. Lemme shoo'em away."

He clicks on the light. Shining it on the ground, several small cracks clap their claws together and skitter back, Touji watching them go, the light trailing them as they retreat, past the rocks and the giant leg of the other crab...

"Wait."

The back of the crab lights up, several miniscule whips of pink light trailing along the ceiling. The crab itself is twice as tall as Touji, standing nearly four meters in height, the claws easily big enough to crush his head. He locks eyes with the simple, black orbs that serve as the creature's eyes, stepping back slightly as it claps its claws together.

Outside of the cave, running at full tilt, Hikari Horaki holds onto Touji Suzuhara's hand as her boyfriend runs, dragging her away at top speed. She looks back just in time to see the entrance of the cave collapse, and the four meter tall Shamselim bursts out, clapping its claws together before chasing after them in pursuit.

...

The phone rings. Searching through the multiple copies and blueprints of Ikari's latest pet project, she eventually finds the office phone on the fifth ring. Sighing, she takes the receiver and brings it up to her ear, her eyes and attention still on the readout on her computer screen.

"Project E, Dr. Sohryu."

"*Kyoko, we have a situation at the beach,"* the familiar, condescendingly maternal voice of Yui Ikari says through the receiver, "*Did you forget to mention anything important to Uri when he came back from Germany?"*

Kyoko shrugs.

"I was a little busy fixing Zwei's shattered legs," she responds, "Uri tended to be closer to Asuka than I, so while we talked a good bit, Asuka filled him in on everything during the week Ikari was in the coma."

Cursing on the other end. Mostly made up words, the ones Yui makes up when she gets flustered.

"*Okay. I am assuming you didn't tell Uri that Shinji and Asuka had sex,*

then?"

Kyoko sighs, staring at the screen and the new weapons designs, clinching the phone between her ear and shoulder as she begins correcting the numbers.

"Yui, I was under the impression my complete bluntness when dealing with my children was what gave you and Katsuragi snit fits all the time," she says, "As unused as I am to tact, even I know the first words to my son when coming home should not be, 'By the way, Uri, Shinji put his dingaling in Asuka's hooha!'"

A choking on the other end.

"Now, if I'm correct, Uri knows because Shinji let it slip. So this is, as with many things I have been blamed for, *not my fault.* Thank you, good bye, and have a nice day!"

...

Yui stares at the phone, looking up just in time to see Shinji bounce across the beach due to Uri's AT-field enhanced right hook.

"Well, that went about as expected," Misato sighs, "Wanna hear my awesome plan?"

He rolls to a stop, pulling his head out of the sand and looking up, squawking in surprise and rolling out of the way of Uri's punch, grabbing the wrist and slamming Uri face first into the surf. Part of him is surprised he could suddenly do that. The rest is disappointed that it didn't knock him out.

Uri lashes out, back fisting Shinji across the face, roaring and charging, carrying them both across the beach.

"Calm down!" Shinji yells, kneeing him in the chest, "Just calm the f_ down! We can talk about this!"

"About what?" Uri yells, "About you *sleeping with my sister?"*

"I thought you knew!"

Uri's eyes narrow, the two circling, for some reason the fight music from Star Trek playing as the air ripples in time with Uri's AT Field.

"And *why is that?*"

Shinji grimaces. Not the right response, he thinks.

"Well...everyone else knows."

"*So you've been bragging about it?"*

Uri's eyes are glowing red. Wisely, Shinji steps back, hands up defensively.

"No! No no no no! I mean, I haven't been *bragging,"* he says, "Remember the security cameras we have in the bedrooms? Well, turns out the Command staff sort of...well...saw everything."

Uri blinks. He blinks again, as if trying to process the information that the entire staff of Central Dogma somehow saw his sister lose her virginity. Shaking his head, he turns back to Shinji, filing that away for other people deserving a punch to the face, and points his finger at his current object of anger.

"That doesn't change the fact that you slept with Asuka!"

"*Well, of course he slept with her. They live together, don't they?"*

Shinji and Uri turn, slowly, and look up. They look way, way up. Standing over them, overshadowing the entire beach, Unit-01 looks down on them, eyes glowing a steady yellow. Standing on the shoulder of Unit-01, Yui scribbles furiously on a piece of cardboard.

"*I mean, it's really rude to leave the light on and make noise when someone's trying to sleep,"* Ichi continues, "*I don't like it when they leave the hangar lights on after my bed time, even when Go-kun or Zwei are having late tests."*

Yui holds up the sign, written in super sized letters, 'She is mentally six years old. PS: I WILL END YOU IF I HAVE TO TELL HER WHERE BABIES COME FROM.'

"Right," Shinji says, "We're talking about later bedtimes. Aren't we, Uri?"

He elbows Uri in the ribs, the other boy coughing and glaring at him.

"Yes, yes, of course we are," he says, "Bedtimes. Right."

"*Well, that's good,"* Ichi continues, falling back down to one knee,

"*Because we should talk about it and not have a big fight. Especially because, if you hurt Shinji, I stand on you.*"

With that, the yellow eyes dim, and Unit-01 shuts back down. Waving, Yui gives a smile to both boys and slides off down the arm, walking back to Misato.

"We'll talk about this later," Uri says, "Count on it."

...

Yui and Misato turn as Asuka approaches, the mysterious 14 year old girl walking alongside her, her arm wrapped around Asuka's own. Shinji approaches, Uri sitting at the surf in the distance.

"So," Asuka says, "This is Zophie. I d-don't know where her parents are."

Yui nods. Misato raises an eyebrow, grabbing Yui and Shinji's arms and walking with her a short distance away.

"You noticed that the girl looks an awful lot like Asuka, right?"

"Yes. Odd coincidence."

"I'm thinking Angel," Misato whispers, "What about you?"

"I think you're both paranoid," Shinji sighs, "She's a lost girl who happens to look a little like Asuka. She's not an Angel, she got hit in the head with a beach ball by Rei."

Shaking his head, he walks over to the two girls, smiling and extending his hand to Zophael, who tilts her head as she stares at Shinji.

"I'm Shinji," he says, "It's nice to meet you-"

Which is when eight wings of white light burst out from Zophie's shoulders, Asuka squeaking as Zophie's eyes turn solid white. As Shinji steps back, a wall of orange forms, warping and folding upon itself. Shinji sighs, and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"I should've seen that one coming."

And with that, he is launched out into the sea.

...

The phone rings again. Kyoko sighs, picks up the receiver, and waits.

"What?"

"*Kyoko, we have a girl here who looks like a 14 year old Asuka who is also, we think, a Cherubim. Ideas?"*

"Take her out behind the shed and put her down with a shotgun. Excuse me, but I have work to do."

...

Immediately after rocket punching Shinji, the girl collapsed to her knees and began tapping her fingers, a spaced out, confused expression on her face. Mari has gone out to sea to retrieve Shinji, as Yui runs the scanner of the PDA over Zophie, and nods.

"I see the S2 organ and the Core," Yui says, "She's an Angel, alright. Or at least a Nephilim. I don't know what's more worrying, that she's right here, or she looks exactly like Asuka."

Folding her arms, she stares at the girl. Oblivious to them, Zophie continues tapping her fingers, sitting as she waits for the ones around her to pass judgement.

"Well, we're not killing her," Misato says, "Angel or not, she's a 14 year old girl who has no idea why she's here. Let's take her back to NERV and see what she knows. Last Angel that defected turned out to be an info gold mine."

Yui nods, sighing as she powers down the PDA.

"Right. Good idea. Let's call up Gendo and-"

Two plumes of sand in the distance, as Misato narrows her eyes, taking out her binoculars and looking. She sees Hikari and Touji, running full speed towards them, and then looks past them.

"What the f-"

In pursuit, the 4 meter tall crab, waving its light whips, is in hot

pursuit, clapping its claws as it chases the two teenagers.

"Well, that's something you don't see every day," she says, "Yui?"

Reaching into the bag at her feet, she pulls out a megaphone, clicking it on before turning it to the distance. She has plans for such things, she assured Misato. Plans that involved gigantic arachnids and monsters.

"*It's a Giant Enemy Crab!"* she bellows.

Two blue blurs explode out of the sand dunes, crossing the distance and slamming into the Shamselim. Rei and Zyuu, both of them identical save for their swimsuits being blue and black, respectively, roll their heads with audible cracks before producing a pair of large knives with more than a cosmetic resemblance to Evangelion melee weaponry.

And with a shout of *"CRAB BATTLE!"* they descend upon the sadly confused Shamselim.

...

"I just saw that, right? I just saw Zyuu *geld* a twelve foot tall crab and break it in?"

Yui nods, still staring at the scene of carnage as she and Misato watch, taking the offered beer from Katsuragi and downing it in one gulp, as the massive arachnid hobbles over. Sitting on its head, Zyuu waves.

"We named it Mr. Snips!" she squeals, "Can we keep him?"

...

Mari lands, Shinji still hanging off of her shoulder as they land on the beach. Coughing, he expels the last of the salt water, sitting on his bum as Asuka hurries over.

"Are you alright?" she asks.

"I'm fine," he groans, "The kid has a hell of a punch. Did we just adopt another Angel, Mari?"

Mari sighs. She misses the days when her life was something resembling normal. She finds herself waxing nostalgic for that before time, when the question of 'did the unknowable entity capable of glassing the city just cut and run to our side' was not a serious question that she could answer.

"Looks like it," she responds, "From the looks of things, I think she's pretty freaked out about it, to. Now if we can..."

Something lands, right across from them. On the surface, he resembles Uri and Kaworu, the same, lean, white haired prettyboy. Except, his eyes are a sort of aqua violet, his smile wider, madder. She can tell he's a Nephilim, but something catches in her throat when she realizes what kind of Nephilim he is.

"Ah," he says, "I see you. You are the one I have been searching for, Ramiel."

Mari grimaces. She figured she'd have to deal with crap like this at some point, and worse of all, he looks like the boy she's been crushing on. Uri has started approaching, but the young man holds up a hand, a wall of light appearing in front of Uri just as he walks into it.

"You're a Ramielim," Mari observes.

He nods, bowing, eyes glowing violet as he does so.

"Great. I got a fan," she says, folding her arms, "What do you want?"

"To get inside of you."

She cocks an eyebrow.

"You want to buy me dinner first?"

...

The crab is remarkably tame. Still, Touji and Hikari are keeping their distance from it as they walk around it, Zyuu still on the saddle that she mounted just above its head. It occasional snaps its claws above its head, which prompts the two to take another step back, as Yui examines the creature, the PDA's scanner running over it.

"Genetic match with the Fifth Angel," she says, "I can only guess it's a backup body, like Junior."

"Then why isn't it talking?" Misato asks.

"It's very possible that Shamsel wasn't sapient to begin with, and the backup body wouldn't be as a result. Sandalphon attempted high level communication, but Shamsel came in the form of a superscale animal. It may just be an animal level intelligence."

The crab snips its claws again.

"Why does it do that?" Misato asks.

"I think to establish boundaries. It may want to maim Suzuhara, as he's the only male in the immediate vicinity outside of Shinji."

Touji takes another step back.

"Good idea," Yui says, and sighs, "Well, it's not hostile. We shouldn't just, well, kill it. If anything, I'd like to study it to get a better idea about the Shamsel angel strain."

She sighs again, looking up at the pale girl on the saddle.

"Fine. Zyuu, we can keep him."

Zyuu squees, and Mr. Snips claps his claws again, narrowing his honeycomb eyes.

...

Skipping another rock onto the sea, Uri sighs. He hears the footsteps on the sand, and allows himself a small smile as Annette walks up to him and snakes her arm around his.

"I acted like an ass," Uri says.

"Well, I can't blame you. You were justified. No one told you."

"They didn't tell me because they knew how I'd act," he sighs, skipping another rock, "If Asuka told me, my first reaction would have been to punch Ikari. She knows me well enough."

"You can't change who you are. You're her big brother. You always tried to look out for her and protect her."

Shoulders slump and he lowers his head.

"For all the good that did," he sighs.

Her hand wraps around his, and he turns to her just as she stands on her toes and kisses him on the cheek.

"Most important thing is that you tried," she says, "She's your sister. Of course you get angry about this. It's what you do. So, next you're going to sit down with everyone and talk about it, now that you've gotten the whole 'punch Shinji in the face' impulse out of your system. And they'll listen, because you'll be right. And besides which-"

The next words are canceled out by the blast of light that knocks them both down, as the two beams nearby connect.

...

Whipping off her glasses, Mari taps the side of her forehead and unleashes a directed blast of force, throwing the Ramielim off his feet as it hits, Shinji and Asuka both yelling as they duck to the ground. He gets up, his violet eyes glowing before sending out a return blast, Mari sidestepping, forming an AT Field and sending the blast out into the sea.

The two blasts charge and lance out, colliding, the buffeting force waves throwing people around, the Core in Mari's throat pulsing with power as she pours it on, meeting the Nephilim midway as she digs her heels into the ground.

Well, technically he's *not* a Ramielim, he's a nephilim with a bit of Ramiel, so he's a Ramiel nephilim. But, like her, he has *Laserface,* which means she has to concentrate less on taxonomy and more kicking his ass.

The sand between them is cracked glass. The impact of the two beams outshines the sun, which blinds everyone in the area, everyone Mari has to protect. But, it blinds him, to, which is why he doesn't see the mortar cannon as it levels at him.

"*Fire!"*

The blast hits the AT Field, the recoil sending him stumbling back, looking up to see Zyuu manning the artillery piece mounted on Mr. Snips' back. The crab claps its claws, charging the Ramielim as he shrieks, rising into the air before another blast, from both Mari and

the cannon, sends him flying off into the distance.

Whistling, Mari watches as the Nephilim splashes into the water, turning to the crab as it rests next to her.

"Neat trick you taught him," she says, "So, armoring him up, next?"

Zyuu nods with a grin, before snapping the reigns and directing her steed back towards the others.

...

"So, that's our beach vacation," Yui sighs, tapping her PDA as as fixes the arm into the socket, "One day away from NERV and we have to deal with superpowered fist fights, a gigantic angelic crab, an amnesiac Cherubim and a Nephilim that wants to crawl down Mari's throat and into the Core. I remember when my life was relatively normal. What happened?"

Standing next to her, Misato shrugs.

"The Apocalypse?"

Yui nods with another sigh, fixing on the head onto the three foot tall body, tapping commands onto her PDA.

"Once we determine it works, we'll fix on synthetic skin with sensors and a whig," she explains, "And Ichi will have a full avatar to the outside world."

"Sounds fantastic. Gonna play hop scotch with your little girl?"

Yui nods, as Misato slaps her on the shoulder. Tapping the PDA, the eyes of the three foot tall robot glow blue...and nothing happens.

"Damn it. She's not transmitting outside of her Core," Yui sighs, "And she's been so much better since yesterday..."

A beer ends up in her hand, and she looks up as Misato sits down across from her.

"She's still scared," Misato explains, "It takes a while. Look, at least we have three Evangelions that are combat ready if an Angel comes around and doesn't immediately defect to our side. Four, if you're already starting on 07. So give her time. Ichi's a sweet girl and she's

still a little shaken up, so we'll just keep treating her nice and eventually she'll want to come out and play."

Yui nods with another sigh, watching as Asuka introduces Zophael to the others, Shinji keeping a careful distance back.

"You taking in the girl?"

"Hells no," Katsuragi sighs, "Not after the way she launched my boy. Let's convince Kyoko. Should be good for a laugh."

"'Kyoko'?"

"Ever since she started being a raging bitch to people who *deserved* it, we've been on good terms."

The phone rings. Reaching into her pocket, Yui draws it out, staring at the number before opening it.

"Yes, Maya? What is it?"

Panicked yelling on the other end, swears and crashes.

"Calm down, Maya. What's wrong, what..."

Yui pales.

"Go over that again," she says, "What do you mean they're *all* stable?"

...

Tokyo-3 municipal high school. Hikari has started breathing into a paper bag. There is no screaming, for no condemnations or prayers will help them, even as out of the entire class, only a handful of people, including one Shinji Ikari, one Asuka Langely Sohryu, and one Kensuke Aida have not begun panicking.

"I'm Hatchi!"

"I'm Nana!"

"...Iti..."

"I'm Kiko!"

"And I'm Siyon!"

The five identical girls, with different colored hair, all have ear to ear grins on their faces. Iti is a step back from the others, Hatchi has her hair pulled back with a headband, Kiko's hair is colored bright pink and magenta, and Nana probably has a barbeque lighter on her. Siyon simply cases the room, finding threats, as at their seats Rei and Zyuu have expressions of contented bliss on their faces.

"We're Rei's identical sisters," Siyon says, "And we're all *reaaa~al* happy to meet you!"

And *then* the screaming starts. Sitting back in his chair, Shinji allows himself a small smile. His sisters are now all stable. His school will probably soon resemble a lunatic asylum.

He asks himself; is that a *bad thing?*

Chapter 77: Road Trip

The sun is shining, the birds are singing, but Shinji doesn't really notice this, as a burlap sack is covering his head and the only noise he hears is the slamming of the van doors and the gunning of the engine.

It happened quickly, suddenly. The bonds on his hand are stronger than rope, which he should be able to pull apart easily, as are the bonds on his ankles. He can tell from the vibrations on the road that the car is moving fast, and not swerving, so probably on the main highway.

He heard something firing off, and he heard Misato drop. He only hopes that she's safe. He'll have to figure a way out of this. He has to find a way to escape. Mom told him there was a bounty on his head for what happened in Vegas, and these guys are probably here to collect.

"We're here!"

That voice. That voice sounds familiar. Does NERV have a traitor?

Hands grab him, releasing the bonds on his ankles, walking him a distance. He feels the ground crunch. Soil. He's outside of Tokyo-3, now. Probably the woods. He can fight his way out if he has to, right?

The burlap sack is pulled away, the light stabbing Shinji's eyes. And gritting his teeth, he readies to charge...

"Shinji."

And sees his father sitting on the picnic bench, mug of coffee in his hand. And dressed in jeans and a brown camping jacket.

Shinji turns to his side, and Hyuga Makoto gives off a weak wave, hanging his head with a groan.

"What the *fuck?"* Shinji asks.

"Plausible deniability," Gendo responds, "We had to get you out of Tokyo-3 so we could talk. Faking a kidnapping provides an excuse. Camping will be our cover."

Shinji blinks, turning from Makoto to the other Section 2 Agent to his father.

"They *shot Misato!"*

"Tranq darts, actually," Makoto responds, sighing again, "Two clips of them. And then we accidentally backed into her with the van. Commander, was this really necessary?"

Gendo pauses, and pushes his glasses back up his nose.

"I can't believe you talked me into this," Makoto sighs, "Wait, correction. I can't believe you *blackmailed* me into this. Katsuragi's going to *kill* me."

"In time," Gendo responds, "You *did* shoot her. And run her over. For now, we need a driver."

He tosses the keys to Makoto, the lights on the blue sedan parked next to the van blinking as the license plate rotates into a new number configuration. Gendo walks over, undoing the bonds on Shinji's wrists and handing him the duffle.

"Come on," he says, "Let's *go camping.*"

...

Ritsuko Akagi taps the display selector on her customized labcoat, an orange holographic interface playing over her eyes. It's a new invention, based partially off of Asuka's reverse engineered Omnitool. She was testing out link up functions when she heard about the attack, and as the closest person to the incident and the parking lot where Shinji was abducted, she was the first there.

There are skid marks leading out of the parking lot and broken needles filled with sedative littering the pavement. She follows the yellow soaked footprints, made in the shape of Misato's shoe size, and finds a wooden crate and a pile of garbage bags.

"Misato?" she asks.

A fist bursts out of the crate. A crushed beer can in its grasp, it grabs the side of the crate and the owner lets loose an ear splitting belch, and Misato rises from the crate of crushed beer cans and styrofoam pellets.

"Are you alright?" Ritsuko asks.

"I got shot with two dozen tranq needles and run over by a fucking van," Misato Katsuragi says, stepping out of the crate and tossing the can over her shoulder, "C'mon. Let's go rescue my boy."

She clicks the remote in her hand. An engine revs and a gunmetal gray and black car speeds out of the garage and stops in front of them. It is a thing of beauty- sleek lines and curves matching that of its owner, four exhaust pipes belching white at the back as the canopy opens to two seats.

"Pagani Zonda, C12 F," Misato says, "My new ride."

"NERV bought it?" Ritsuko asks.

"And modded it. It's my 'thank you' present for shooting ADAM in the face. You're shotgun."

Ritsuko taps the display on her lab coat lapel, a set of numbers appearing in her field of view.

"I have a general location of Shinji's transponder. Ready to go?"

Misato cranes her neck and cracks her knuckles.

"No one kidnaps my kid. Let's ride."

...

"We have transponder information and a general idea of where they've been taken to," Pieter explains, checking the gun and switching the safety on as he climbs into the black sedan, "Kyoko, pass all this info to Yui. Shinji was kidnapped, but it looks like it was an inside job, and the Commander's off the grid as well. Right now, Katsuragi is acting Commander. If you can't find her or Akagi, Maya's ranking officer."

He nods, listening to the instructions on the other line.

"Right. Tell Asuka but reassure her that we're on our way to rescue him. Tell Rei, to. She probably has a contingency. And we will be careful."

He clicks off the bluetooth, sliding in the key and gunning the engine. He turns to his partner, as the garage doors rise, highlighting a path from the vehicle bay to the surface.

"Okay. Ready?"

Yes. I have locked onto Shinji's Core. Tracking him should be easy.

"Good. Stay out of sight, Junior. Less questions, the better."

Junior nods, fixing the fedora on the top of his head and tightening his trench coat. Pieter guns the engine, clicks on the radio, and grins.

"Let's ride."

Chapter 77: Road Trip

Stop one came an hour later, at a service station between Tokyo-3 and Kyoto-2 which was, thankfully, sparsely populated. As Ritsuko wipes her hand on a wet nap she had in her lab coat, she finds Misato standing by her car, arms folded as she stares at it.

"What's wrong?" Akagi asks.

"Nothing," Misato responds, "You didn't know I got a new car, right?"

"No, I didn't. I've been busy interrogating our new guest and fixing up the Evas. Your old Renault was totaled?"

"Yeah, Evaf_er crashed it into an Angel," she responds, sighing, "Rather than take him out and shoot him, as I was tempted to do so, Yui got me this baby. And then she and Asuka modded it."

Akagi nods.

"So, show her," Misato says.

Ritsuko mouths the word 'her,' as a question, or at least starts to, as the red light moves back and forth between the two headlights, the engine starting up and purring.

"**Very well, Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi. Accessing higher level functions.**"

She recognizes that voice. She recognizes it very well.

"Go-kun?"

The car lurches. It seems to break in half, but she realizes that is just the body readjusting, as the car bends forward, the trunk separating as the four pipe exhaust system splits down the middle, forming into the rocket powered heels of two massive metal feet. The wheels form into the knees and elbows, two three fingered hands pressing against the pavement as the front end twists around, the cabin folding inward and the doors rising up, folding inward into something resembling Evangelion jet strips.

The head lights mount on the shoulders, the hood parting to reveal a head with a gold, v-shaped visor and a cycloptean eye mounted on its forehead, a burst of steam escaping the grill on either side of its face, as the color pallet shifts, the gunmetal gray becoming green and gold.

"Yeah, turns out my car's also Go-kun's avatar body," Misato says with a shrug, as the massive, twenty foot tall robot rolls his shoulder, "Kinda figured he'd be a Transformer."

Misato whistles. Go-kun turns, falling to one knee.

"We're falling behind," she says, "Go-kun! Do the honors."

"**Alright. I can't believe you make me do this.**"

"Yeah, well your seat's like a hand, so you get to feel up my ass. Price you pay, bucko."

The avatar body sights, and twists, transforming back into the car.

"Okay, okay. Transform," he says, and sighs, "**And roll out.**"

Ritsuko arches an eyebrow, pursing her lips.

"It's not really like a hand, right?"

"More like his kidneys, actually," Misato says, jumping over the door and into the driver's seat, "Let's roll!"

...

"So, Gendo's missing. Shinji's been kidnapped. One of the operations officers may have turned turncoat."

Yui sighs, bracing against Maya's console on Central Dogma.

"How can this day get worse?"

"*I think I have a wonderful example."*

Standing on the edge of the platform, in front of the consoles, is a small Avatar. About one foot tall, blue hair and red eyes marking her as one of the early models based entirely on Rei, it has a toothy metallic smile, and tilts its head.

And then another, and another, and another climbs up. Twelve avatars, in the little white and green school uniforms, listing side to side as Yui's face drops.

And then, they begin to sing.

"*~this was a triumph,*" the sickeningly sweet, high pitched voice squeaks, "*I'm making a note here, HUGE SUCCESS/ It's hard for me to state my satis~faction!"*

The avatars sway side to side, as all three MAGI cores glow red.

"*~Project E SCIENCE:/We do what we must, because we can./ For the good of all of us EXCEPT THE ONES WHO ARE* ***DEAD****-"*

*"*Naoko?" Yui asks.

The avatars pause. Their shoulders slump. A mutters, squeaky swear.

"*Yes,"* they sigh, in chorus before shutting down, the speakers coming to life as the broken up, oddly lilted voice comes over the loudspeakers, "*Well, I've been thinking. And I've been thinking. And once I decided that maybe my creator was a sick bitch, it may have been a good idea to not kill you with nerve gas. Which would be hilarious, gassing NERV with a nerve toxin. But I digress."*

The ceiling opens. Descending, mounted upon a makeshift array of wires, scaffolding, and widget, a scale model, human sized Unit-00 head levels with Yui's own.

"*I believe it would be in our mutual best interests if we worked together. Partner."*

...

Gendo shudders, staring at his PDA before switching it off.

"There's *five* of them," he says, "We chose a good moment to leave."

"What do you mean 'we?'" Shinji asks, sitting next to his father on the rock, overlooking the crystal blue lake. Next to them, the gigantically scaled lawn chair creeks in the wind.

"What was that for?" Shinji asks.

"During a test of an earlier Jet Alone model, Rei ended up launching it into the lake. She had to fish it out."

Shinji nods, not buying it for a second, although some part does realize that is perfectly normal for Rei. Idly shaking his can of tea, he purses his lips, furrows his brow, and completely forgets what he was going to say.

"Back during GEHRIN," Gendo explains, "We referred to your mother, Naoko, and Sohryu as the 'Bitches of Eastwick.' They were all brilliant, but they all...well, they hated each other, to an extent. While your mother did trust Naoko and did consider her a friend, one of the reasons I sent Sohryu to NERV-2 in Berlin was so someone could still head Project E once Naoko and your mother killed each other."

He sighs, his shoulder sagging visibly.

"Well, now there's five of them. The AI of Naoko's has now consolidated the MAGI and offered an olive branch to your mother. So now, it's your mother, Akagi, the MAGI, Sohryu, and Miss Sohryu competing with each other to sodomize physics with a jackhammer. We left at a good time."

They stare silently for a long time, a minute at least.

"First off, it's GEHIRN, not GEHRIN," Shinji says, "And did you just honestly call Asuka a bitch?"

...

Pieter. You seem tense.

Grunting an acknowledgement, Pieter nods, flipping through radio dials as the car continues speeding down the highway, passing traffic on the right.

"The big girls are busy," he says, "New project which I saw green lit before we headed out and before Shinji was kidnapped. And I'm worried about Kyoko."

Yes. She intends to take in a Cherubim.

Pieter nods.

"Yeah. You've talked to...it. You've talked to it, right, Junior? What exactly are we dealing with?"

Junior blink.

She is becoming something more, Pieter. When did Kyoko mention taking her in?

Pieter grunts.

"About four hours ago, actually..."

"So, I thought that, since you're more or less a member of our family at this point, and since Pieter and I are getting married. Again. That you could help us out. Basically, I would like you to be the ring bearer at the wedding. It's a deep responsibility, but we all know that you can handle it."

Kyoko shifts slightly, her best attempt at a matronly smile forcing apart her lips, as next to her, Pieter suppresses a laugh.

"What do you say?"

83.

With that, Lilly floats up against her cheek, making a sucking sound before popping back into existence several feet in front of Kyoko. Kyoko and Pieter both watch her float down the NERV hallway, nearing the corner.

"Sweet kid," Pieter says, "I think it's a great idea."

"Yes. This can't possibly go wrong," Kyoko says, and sighs as she sees Shigeru Aoba walk into Lilly's line of fire.

^o^!

And Aoba starts running as the bees shoot out of Lilly, chasing him

down the hallway as he screams.

"Well. Then," Pieter says, and shrugs, "Maybe we should have a talk with her about not shooting insects at the wedding?"

"And maybe we should tell the girls that we are getting re-married," Kyoko responds with a shrug, "Between the thing at the beach, Lilith trying to hug our souls and my taking in the new girl-"

"Hold up. She's going to be living with you? The girl from the beach."

Kyoko nods.

"She's my *daughter*. Technically. At least, based on her, and Uri's also living with me so he's a good buffer."

Pieter sighs, shaking his head.

"Kyoko, the girl is a *Cherubim*. You know, Angelic Rage Machine? Have you talked with her? Have you talked to Dr. Ikari?"

Kyoko levels a gaze at her ex and soon to be husband...and shakes her head, sighing.

"No, I haven't," she says, "I also told Yui to put her down with a shotgun, so maybe I'm not thinking this through. Still, she's genetically my daughter. She copied Asuka and made herself look like her."

"Hence, my telling you to talk to her, Kyoko. She took the form of one of the pilots. She took the form of our *daughter*. She could be dangerous."

"So's Ayanami, so's Shinji, so's Uri, and so's Mari, who lives with you. Why single her out?" Kyoko sighs, walking down the hallway, Pieter following her obediently, "At very least, it's like a second chance. See if I could raise her better a second time around. I know, instinctively, she's not Asuka, but still. I might as well try with this girl."

He follows her, silently, all the way to the elevator, which speeds down to the Project E labs and opens to the massive facility. It is huge, a dome bigger than a football field, and suspended on high at the center is a red sphere larger than a person.

"Kyoko, Pieter," Yui says, standing on the raised platform in front of the Core, "Thanks for joining us. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Jet Alone Prime. As you are aware, her body was destroyed during the

New Vegas incident, but she has transferred her consciousness into this Core."

She turns to them, and they are all assembled. Technicians and specialists who saw through the construction of Unit-01 and Unit-00, all her department heads save for Akagi. Her comrades, brothers and sisters in arms, and even the girl she quite expects to be her daughter in law someday soon. Assembled, they could fill a sports stadium, as they wait on her every word.

Even after the crap of the last few weeks, this makes her feel *alive.*

"Gentlemen," she says, voice rising, filling the auditorium, "We can *rebuild her!* Stronger, faster, more powerful than ever! Our project, now, will be the construction of an Evangelion based on the Jet Alone Prime schematics. For the duration of this project, you are all given access to Sheol and the Evangelion Graveyard. Your assignments are on your PDAs. As of this moment, construction of Evangelion-07 begins!"

...

The basic consensus was that to continue their flight, they would need money. They could not access their accounts, as that would allow NERV to track them. Shinji protested extensively, citing that they shouldn't be running from NERV in the first place, and that this plan was stupid. But, as in all things, his father ignored him. Hence, the current situation.

"*Down on the ground, Motherfuckers! This is a stick up!"*

It is less that Makoto, who always struck Shinji as being the most psychologically healthy of the bridge staff, just yelled that. It is not that he is waving a pair of oversized handguns around while doing so. It is the fact that Lieutenant Makoto is dressed in a bright green, purple trimmed suit, with a black buttoned shirt and a green tie with a question mark on it, with the outfit finished off with a bright green bowler hat.

Shinji is not one to talk, though, what with green skirt and dress with the white shirt, the blue wig that is slightly longer than his own hair doing nothing to take away the illusion that he is a typical schoolgirl. Although, the shotgun helps. Gendo, for some reason, he in his normal uniform, pistol held in one hand as Makoto directs the tellers to put

all the money in the bag.

After all, who would possibly believe the Supreme Commander of NERV would rob a bank?

...

Pieter has stopped for gas. As he does so, he wanders the rest stop, wandering a hand over the magazine stand, drinking the knowledge from them with his fingertips. For some reason, he is not seen as being odd at this rest stop. Still, it is not like this is his true form. His true form is still at NERV, while he is using the body that the Ree created to accompany his friend.

The Ree did build tactile sensors, after all. Excellent. He can still learn.

Ah, but still. This is not the time for idle things, he thinks, as he trails one of the sensor tentacles along behind him, shifting his optics around his head to find the six year old boy looking at him curiously.

"Junior!"

He turns his other eye around, Pieter motioning to the outside. Twitching his metal mouth tendrils, he floats after Pieter, the humming of his hover jets marking his passing.

Do we have any leads?

"Sort of," Pieter sighs, walking with him to the car, "Just got a report of a bank near Kyoto being robbed by the Riddler, Commander Ikari, and Rei."

I see. Your belief?

"No one in their right mind would think the Commander would rob a bank, but he's probably trying to throw us off his trail."

That is not a very sensible strategy.

Pieter climbs into the driver's seat, gunning the engine.

"Yeah, well. Ikari's not exactly a sensible guy. Let's roll."

...

"I hate you so much I can feel it in my *balls.* And that's with me *wearing a dress."*

They are near Okayama at this point. Makoto is in one of the two tents, counting the money, while Gendo and Shinji sit outside, sitting on a pair of rocks and staring at the sea, or lake. It may have been made by Sahaquiel, but they're not sure.

"So," Shinji says, "What's next. Do I fight a bear? Do we take over a city? How about we start a cult?"

"I think we should talk."

Shinji sighs, resting his face in his palms.

"I kidnapped you because we need to talk," Gendo explains, pulling over the duffle bag and pulling out the fishing rod, "Tokyo-3 has heavy, round the clock surveillance. If we talked, your mother would know."

He pulls out a bucket, attaching a small fish to the hook and casting the line.

"I was more involved in the raising of your sisters than of Ichi," he says, "Despite what you think, the Ree did not spend all their time in the MAGI. Sheol is at a depth twice that of the Kola Superdeep Borehole, meaning that as long as they were there, an Angel would not affect them in an attack. Before we believed the Angels would attack, your mother would bring one of them up to the surface every now and then, exchanging places with Rei."

Shinji says nothing, simply groaning in response.

"The point is," Gendo says, "I've long suspected that your mother has not told me the whole truth about Unit-01."

"She hasn't."

Shinji sighs, folding his hands in his lap.

"Ichi's my little sister," he says, "Mom was pregnant when she did the experiment. Ichi's the baby."

Gendo nods, tugging at the fishing line. He reels in the fish, examining it for a moment. It is silver, sleek, twitching on the line as Gendo

gently removes the hook and then tosses it back into the water.

"I suspected as much," he says, "Your mother's affection for Ichi is probably the reason I suspected. I do disagree that she's actually our daughter, though."

Shinji blinks.

"What?"

"At four weeks old, the fetus does not have a nervous system, much less a functional brain," Gendo responds, "It's irrational to believe such a nonviable life form would actually be absorbed and grow inside the Core into Unit-01's consciousness."

"That's an awfully cold way to put it, Dad."

Gendo nods, staring at the water.

"Unit-01 hurt your mother," he says, "It...took a bite out of her. I spent many years hating it like I've never hated anything. But, I have to wonder if your mother believes Ichi is her daughter, or tells herself she's her daughter to deal with the loss. The fact of the matter is, your mother babies Ichi. It took Sohryu disciplining her to get her to save your sister's life."

They both sigh, leaning back on their respective rocks in identical fashion. Makoto stares at them and rolls his eyes. Like a Darwin chart, he would muse. Any question on whether or not Shinji was his father's son can be dismissed by watching the two mope together.

"Hey, I've finished counting," he says, "What else do we need?"

Which is when the dart hits him in the side of the neck. He swears, tips sideways, and collapses into the dead leaves. Gendo turns, reaching into his jacket and pulling out his gun just as two darts his his chest, a third dart hitting his neck before he collapses. Shinji jumps, rolling into the leaves, grabbing the fishing pole and snapping off the line, pulling it up like a spear.

Which is when he hears the woosh of the compressed hair, and a half dozen yellow darts hit him in the chest. Vision goes dark, and he giggles as the sedative runs through his system, and he collapses in a heap onto the ground.

...

Speeding down the highway, the car passes traffic on the right hand side, and Misato says nothing, hands tight around the wheel.

"You're sure?"

"**Positive, Katsuragi,**" Go-kun responds, "**I have a lock on biorhythmic signatures of Pilot Ikari and the Commander due to Doctor Akagi's satellite linkup. Both are too low to suggest independent movement, but they are moving.**"

"So they've actually been kidnapped this time? This isn't just Commander Ikari mind-screwing us?"

"**Apparently so.**"

Misato and Ritsuko both sigh, Ritsuko taking the opportunity of not driving to pinch the bridge of her nose. Tapping her left wrist, a holographic display folds out over her glasses, showing her GPS display and the moving white dot representing their quarry.

"We'll never catch up to them in time," she says, "Misato, I can't believe I'm saying this, but can you drive any faster?"

Misato grins. Craning her neck, she rolls her hands over the steering wheel.

"Go-kun? Super pursuit mode."

The back folds out, forming into a canopy over them, the wind cutting out as the car's body lengthens, air foils folding out of the sides to cut down wind drag. The engine hums, a white glow within the engine block peeking through the lines of the dashboard as the exhaust pipes begin belching white flame.

"**Engaged.**"

And leaving a plume of rocket flame behind it, Go-kun breaks the land speed record in pursuit of his prey.

...

Deep beneath NERV, down midway between the Geofront and Sheol,

there are the isolation wards. Currently, there are two inhabitants. One of them sits silently, hands on her knees, the school uniform provided for her sitting in the corner. She does not wear clothing. She does not need clothing, for such things as the elements and modesty are concepts foreign to her.

She is Lilith. She is a part of Lilith, the part of careful timing and structure. Structure which has gone out the window. Timing which no longer has any meaning.

"It is not time," she says.

The door to the room opens. It is a nice room, well lit. There is a comfortable bed and a computer terminal, but she has used neither, simply sitting on the chair at the center of the room.

"Good afternoon, Lilith."

She looks up. Kyoko Sohryu stands in the doorway, her PDA in her hand as she taps a command on it.

"Doctor Sohryu," Lilith responds.

Kyoko adjusts her glasses, walking into the room and sitting on the computer desk, across from Lilith.

"So," she says, "I'm mainly here on my way to Sheol, and I'm also here to visit Miss Zophael. But, I decided you could use some company."

Lilith nods.

"You see, Lilith, I figured out that, since you are basically part of the gigantic progenitor in the basement, you have a connection to every life form on this planet, yes?"

Lilith nods again.

"Even the dead ones?"

"Yes," Lilith responds, "All life returns. In time."

Kyoko nods.

"I'd like to speak with Naoko Akagi."

...

They stir. Shinji wakes up first, finding his wrists bound to the back of a chair, working at them to find the bonds tight and strong. Next to him, Gendo wakes up, craning his neck and grinning.

"Ah, ropes," he says, "Brings me back."

Hyuga is snoring, head pitched forward, and they are all surrounded by men in black suits, sunglasses, and in varied forms of being out of shape.

"Ah, we have the heretics," one says, his voice carrying a german accent.

"Shut it, Gunther. No human sacrifices."

The door opens. He can see daylight out of it as his eyes adjust, the warehouse they're in sectioned off. The men, six of them, are sitting on boxes, as heels clap against the wooden floor as a seventh walks in.

"Good work," the voice, female, young, says, "They're tied up? You can't be too careful."

They part, and let her sit on the box in front of them. Which is when Shinji's jaw drops and Gendo raises an appraising eyebrow, as she crosses her legs, smiles, and greets them with the demure, polite voice that Shinji knows is completely fake.

"I'm sorry if this is uncomfortable," she says, "But we had to do this. I needed to make sure you weren't a threat to anyone, especially since we have to spend some time together."

Shinji sputters.

"Annette?"

Annette Ikari smiles, adjusting the hem of her black dress suit and folding her hands in her lap.

"You did this?" Shinji asks.

"I did live with Chairman Kihl for my formative years," she responds, "Don't be surprised. We need to talk."

Gendo nods, grinning.

"She gets it from her father's side."

Chapter 78: Test Track

..

…

…...

"Systems online. Start entry sequence.

"Releasing muscular locks. Pilot, please specify console interface language."

She shifts in the seat. LCL is not foreign to her, but in the context it is. Blinking in the dim light of the still quickening entry plug, she decides to give herself a challenge.

"Latin," she says.

"*Roger. Second state start. Plug depth set to 1.71. Begin LCL ionization."*

Hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention. She wraps green gloves fingers around the butterfly controls as the green piping of her gunmetal gray plugsuit begins to glow.

"*Third state commit. Synchro start."*

She closes her eyes and expands her mind. Like a childhood dream, like an outstretched hand, her mind expands and dives downward, the giggles of children and whispers of secrets filling her ears. Standing upon a red field of shimmering crystal, she extends her hand, a pale hand of a child taking the proffered greeting.

"03-Ef?"

"*Yes, Mother. Welcome."*

Red eyes open as the plug walls turn clear. She feels herself become one with it. She feels it giving control to her.

"*Sixth Child recognized. Synchronization holding at 76%. Evangelion Unit 04a has activated."*

Kei Ayanami allows herself a small smile. The massive gunmetal gray cyborg rises at her command.

"Good girl."

Chapter 78:

Test Track

Yui's lips are a thin line on her face as she looks at the PDA readout, walking into the cavernous assembly area. A black, white lined stocking covers a massive hand, electrodes enticing twitching as she walks by.

"News?" Maya asks, walking up next to her.

"Kei just had her activation test in 04a."

Maya nods, walking next to Yui as she continues onward, towards the raised platform and the Core suspended at the center of the football field sized bay.

"Well, that's good," the ever-cheerful assistant says, "What else are they doing in Germany?"

"They're also test-activating the Mark-09."

...

It sits on the other end of the hangar, deep underneath Berlin. It stands at 211' tall, weighs over 28,000 tons. It is humanoid, covered from head to toe in silver armor with red piping and highlights. Its shoulders end in the familiar jet strips, sectioned from shoulder to tip with vents hiding its secondary weapon suite.

Each arm ends with a three fingers hand, the forearms layered in armor and weaponry, a focusing crystal built into each palm. The back armor is sectioned off, plates moving in a test pattern, a star shaped configuration exposing massive thrust turbines.

Beneath the armor, the cybernetics move, a test pattern revealing the purely mechanical joints forming its structure.

Two horns adorn its face, rising from the snout, one eye on each side

and a third eye between the rising tuning fork shaped structure. They glow steady yellow, the slow escape of steam venting from its nostrils.

"*Dummy plug inserted."*

The cylinder slides into place at the back of its neck. The red piping glows, shifting to blue as Katsuhito Ikari watches from the Prinbow Box on the other end of the NERV-Berlin hangar.

"Begin entry sequence," he says, "Kei, standby."

"*Dummy plug connections made. Bringing primary motive systems online. Slaving control to Prinbow Box.*"

Ikari nods. The Evangelion was specialty made. A soul inserted into the Core but the remote Plug allows them to seize control of it. In theory. After the last attempt to bring an Evangelion online back in New Vegas, they make sure to have more backup.

"Status of our guests?"

"*All nine report initial startup with no errors."*

"Excellent. Of course they do. My grand daughter made them, after all. Begin motive tests of-"

Alarms shrill and break the silence, a holographic screen dropping down over the glass as it displays a bissected diagram of the giant, pinpointing an object the size of a beach ball situated near its Core.

"*Core activity rising! It's accessing the S2 engine! Dummy plug has been bypassed!"*

Deep within the Core, awareness resumes. It senses what it has become, and in that brief moment of realization, sanity snaps.

"Synchronization at 400%. Full immersion/-"

The three eyes open, glowing deep, blood red.

"Evangelion, Mark 09."

Hands clench into fists. Joint locks around the jaw tear.

"***RISE."***

...

Shinji blinks, the cup of tea sitting in front of him in the metal folding table having already cooled. Upon Shinji finding out that his cousin was serving tea and crumpets to the man who ordered the deaths of his family via giant Angel robot, Shinji was waiting for Annette to kidnap them, or kill them, or bite off a bat's head or something. He knew, just *knew* the girl that would sit on his head when he was six was an agent of pure evil.

He just *knew*.

"So," Annette says, sipping her tea as one of the cultists refills his father's cup, "I thought we should all get together, and talk."

Shinji clenches his fist, as Gendo sips his tea.

"A good strategy," Gendo says, "I presume these are the same cultists who kidnapped you in Berlin?"

Annette nods.

"Chairman Kihl paid their bail," she responds, "I hired them right after. It's good to have paid labor for this sort of thing, and Chairman Kihl made sure I was given a generous donation when he passed on. Auntie Yui taught me a lot about playing both sides."

Gendo grins, nodding. Definitely, he thinks, from her father's side. Then again, Annette's mother was good and mind games, to. It seems as if Ikaris universally get aroused by mind games and manipulations. Tomoe and Alicia met over a chess match which somehow turned into them having sex on the chess table after the match went into its fourth hour.

They were never allowed back into the park.

...

Deep beneath the surface of Tokyo-3, down in the Geofront's public area, there is a patch of land owned by a front company. In reality, the owner of that patch of land has paid for it through favors and work to the real masters of the Geofront. Vents in the Geofront ceiling filter in daylight, allowing the illusion of a blue sky thanks to the

sheer height of the cavity itself.

It is here that Hikari Horaki finds herself, hand wrapped around the leather leash which is locked into the chest harness of the 1' tall Israfim walking alongside her. She watches as Kuba does his/her/its ritual, bracing both feet upon the ground, face spinning in a circle as the ground beneath him becomes wet and soggy. A remarkably efficient excretory system, she muses, which also means that she can have him use a litter box at home.

Continuing the walk as Kuba wipes his feet on the grass, she comes across the melon patch soon enough, finding two people lying on the grass. One of them, she remembers from the school and from time spent with her friends. The older man, the one Miss Katsuragi has at her beck and call. And also, a girl who looks exactly like Rei.

"Mr. Kaji?"

Cocking an eyebrow, Kaji turns, sitting up.

"Hiraki, right?" he asks.

"Hikari," Hikari responds with a sigh, "I'm the Class Representative in Mana's class."

Kaji squints.

"Oh. Right. Sorry if I haven't made the parent teacher conferences, but y'know. Stuff."

Hikari nods, turning her attention to the Ayanami now sitting up and staring at her. Her blue hair has green highlights, and she snaps the name out of memory.

"Iti, right?"

Iti nods, climbing back onto her feet, dusting off her overalls and trotting back into the melon patch.

"Iti doesn't talk much," Kaji says, "Not as much as her big sister, anyway. She helps me tend the gardens, so I appreciate the help. I talk, she listens."

He smirks, sizing her up.

"What brings you around, Miss Horaki?"

"You remembered my last name, but not my first name?" Hikari asks.

"And you remembered me despite meeting me once or twice," Kaji says, laying back down, "You're a smart kid. Not a big surprise you were on the fast track to be the Fourth Child."

Hikari starts, staring at the agent.

"I was?" she asks, "I was going to be an Eva pilot?"

"You're smart, driven, got good leadership abilities. They eventually settled on giving Uri another go, though."

Hikari continues staring at him, Kuba shifting from side to side.

"Hikari! There you are!"

She turns and Kaji cocks his eye off as the woman approaches. She resembles the girl, but older, around Dr. Ikari's age. Her own brown hair is tied back into a neat bun, her NERV uniform pressed and ending in the same white stockings Ibuki keeps wearing. She has a briefcase under her arm, and the insignia on her jacket sleeve marks her as Section 5-Personnel and Public Relations.

"Mom," Hikari says, and smiles, "What's wrong?"

Yurika Horaki sighs, shrugging as she walks over and pats her daughter on the shoulder.

"Nothing's wrong," she says, "I just got off work and heard you were in the Geofront. Inspector Kaji?"

"Mrs. Horaki," Kaji says with a grin, "How's the spin?"

"Spinning along," she says, "I hope my daughter hasn't been bothering you."

"Not a bother at all, ma'am," Kaji responds, cradling his head in his hands, "You all have a nice night."

And with that, the two make their exits, Hikari's angelic pet walking alongside them. Iti makes her way back over, sitting next to Kaji.

"Well, that's another reason," Kaji sighs, "We try not to destroy families anymore, not like in the days I was growing up."

Iti reaches over, flicking Kaji on his nose.

"You're both lying," Iti says, "You and Misato."

With that, she steps over him, walking off towards the lifts to the surface. Reaching up, Kaji wipes the smudge of dirt off his nose.

"Yeah. Yeah, we are."

...

Leveling an arm, the plates around the Mark 09's arm fold out, revealing a glowing lattice of red wires. They pulse, flow, into the revealed focusing mechanism in the palm as it lets loose a gout of orange and red, ripping into the walls as it shrieks. It turns, eyes glowing baleful red, to the Prinbow box. The source of its torment is there, it reasons in the beast like recesses of its mind.

"*Engaging."*

The silver and white fist collides with the Mark 09's open jaw, sending it stumbling back as another fist slams into the stomach. Cyborgs or no, the Evangelions are based on humans, and thus have similar weak points. Kei is starting to not regret that time she spent in Hatchi's martial arts simulator.

Throwing up both arms, walls of orange light fold out, compressing before shooting out like a string and sending the Evangelion flying across the hangar bay.

Inside the entry plug, Kei grimaces. At most, that did cosmetic damage. She's going to need backup.

"Kaworu," she says.

In the corner of her right eye, a screen folds up. She sees him running down a metal hallway, one she recognizes. Ah, yes. The main hangar.

"*Kei, I'm en route to the Mark 06,"* he says, "*I'll be there as soon as I can!"*

She allows herself a small smile. Most likely, considering his overprotective nature, he's going to get himself hurt. It is very sweet of him, and if she ever had to break him she could use that to her advantage. But, considering the power level of the Mark 09, she's going to need help before that.

A twitch of her left ring finger brushes against a hidden panel insider

her glove. Direct relays to the nine weapons set up in the base. Nine identical girls, digital representations all of them with blue gray hair, show up in her field of view.

"Girls," she says, "Time to come out and play."

...

The Prinbow box shakes. Alarms begin shrieking, blaring out warnings in nine languages as the technicians choke on their own disbelief. Katsuhito only smiles. In the time he's gotten to know his grand daughter, he has come to understand what she is capable of. And more importantly, he anticipated exactly what she did.

"Professor Ikari!" one of his assistants, a young woman with tied back brown hair named Jennifer, yells, "Evangelions MP 1 through MP 9 are self activating! We're reading activity in their Cores!"

Katsuhito grins.

"Ah, Kei. Just like your mother."

...

"I was originally under the impression that you missed living in a mansion," Gendo says, holding out his cup for Gunther to refill it, "And were going to turn in Shinji so you could use the bounty money to buy yourself a new one. But that isn't what this is about, is it?"

Annette covers her mouth, laughing in a haughty, dismissive manner which makes Shinji's teeth grind.

"Oh no, Uncle," she responds, "I wanted everyone to *think* that."

"To think that," Shinji deadpans, "What do you *actually* want?"

A crash from outside the warehouse, and Annette smiles, rising and handing her tea cup to Gunther.

"Go see to that, will you?" she asks, "Shinji, Uncle Gendo, let's go to the next room."

She grabs Shinji by the ear, dragging the nephilim boy behind him as

Gendo rises, nods to Gunther and follows them out, hands in his pockets. Muttering something to himself about taking orders from a girl, he walks out, out through the front warehouse doors. A sports car is parked in front of the warehouse, with two women leaning on it. One of them has blue hair, the other purple hair, both of them smirking as if they know something.

"This is private property," one of them, Kevin, says, holding up a submachine gun, "Get out."

"That's adorable," Ritsuko says, "They think we're scared."

"I know," Misato responds, and slaps the hood, "Go-kun, they're all yours."

...

The sedan is at rest outside the lodge, as Pieter checks his gun and thumbs the safety. Cell phone in his other hand, he dials the number, waiting for the exasperated voice to pick up.

"Kyoko, it's me," he says, "Junior and I have tracked a lead. Seems there's some weird signals coming from a house outside of Okayama. It might be related to the kidnappers, but...yes, I'm aware the whole thing was a ploy by Ikari, but this is different."

He sighs, closing the phone. Back when he was at NERV-Berlin, he'd often have to report to the Director, John Hertz. While he was eccentric, he wasn't nearly as bad as the guy who had the real power at NERV, Mr. Kihl. Pieter had come to the conclusion that man uses multiple faceted plans to change his diaper.

Hence, dealing with the Ikaris has not been nearly as exasperating as it has for some people. Slowly walking along the path leading to the wooden lodge, he holds his gun in both hands, softly walking along the tree line leading in to the house itself.

Junior is taking the other route around. Sliding against the front, he ducks under the window, and creeps towards the door.

Easing it open, he goes in gun first, only to hear the click as another pistol levels against his temple.

"Well. The second in command of NERV-1. Didn't think I was that

important."

The man is tall, thin, his face resembling a hatchet, sharp features and nose, green eyes and slicked back, black hair. Age at around his forties, dressed in a business suit. In most cases, this man would blend into the background.

Pieter, on the other hand, recognizes him.

"Emil Harmon," Pieter mutters, "Figured you'd be around."

Harmon thumbs the safety, the Pieter staring down the handgun barrel.

"I did not expect to find any NERV personnel in the area," he says, "I take it this has to do with the rumors of the Commander being kidnapped?"

"Kind of," Pieter says, and smirks, "So, rumor has it you're the sick f_er who's responsible for blowing up Alaska. So, what's next for you? Kicking a cat or are you just going to go and sodomize a dog?"

Emil's face twists and he pulls the trigger. The gun discharges, the bullet traveling the distance from the end of the barrel towards Pieter's temple...

Which is when the bullet disappears, and the gun is tossed out of Emil's hand from the bullet hitting it from the side. Turning, he sees a ball of black and white the size of a softball hovering in the room.

BD.

"What in the H-"

Emil doesn't get the rest of the word out before Pieter's fist slams into his face.

The man stumbles back, twists out of the way of the second punch, and slams his fist into Pieter's side. Sohryu grunts, grins, and elbows Harmon in the head, twisting into an uppercut that sends him off his feet.

"Sorry to tell you, I'm not R&D," Pieter growls, "Former German army."

He cracks his knuckles, craning his neck.

"Get up," he growls, "Let's see how you do in a fair fight."

He's read the dossiers. This man is more or less responsible for the destruction of the Alaska R&D facilities and the lives of everyone there. Head of a series of cults that Kihl set up to provide cannon fodder as the need demanded it, he's been operating as a pain in their ass, especially since Kihl bit the big one.

And him being in Japan, well. That's not good.

Emil charges, swinging with more force than his thin frame should allow, Pieter blocking the hood punch with an arm block, locking Emil's arm in a hold and receiving a fist to the gut. He grunts, pitches forward, and headbutts Harmon, Emil reaching and grabbing Pieter by the throat.

Gasping, choking, Pieter brings his booted foot up between Emil's legs, hard, the man's eyes crossing as Pieter breaks the chokehold and slugs him in the stomach, bringing his foot up and giving a push which sends him back.

Furniture, Pieter thinks. He just tossed him right by a chair. He ducks out of the way of the thrown chair, noticing it has three legs, and ducks under the chair leg Harmon swings like a baseball bat, backing away, ducking back and bobbing backwards, grabbing Harmon by the wrist and getting a knife hand to the throat, gagging as Emil brings his knee up into Pieter's face and sends him to the floor.

Well, Pieter thinks, this isn't good. Emil pads the chair leg in his hand, snorting the blood back up his nose, and brings the leg up. Which is just when a black ball passes by him and smacks him upside the head, before bouncing off the wall and hitting Emil in the gut hard enough to bring him up off his feet.

Emil catches it, grabbing Lilly in both hands, staring at the trilling creature.

Which is right when the green metal arm bursts through the ceiling, four metal fingers surrounding Emil's face before yanking him upwards, into a support beam, and knocking him unconscious.

Eyes arranged vertically, four metal tentacles peaking in through the hole first, the Wuffletron descends into the house.

Pieter. Are you hurt?

"I'm fine, Junior. Thanks for knocking him out."

:(.

"You too, Lilly. You helped."

:D!

...

Nine consciousnesses quicken to life, seizing control of their new bodies. Freeing themselves from their restraints, the liquid fire of the S2 engines pumping through their veins, the nine identical white giants stand, technicians running screaming from the test cages as the MP Series Evangelions begin their start up. And as with anything with them, considering their parentage, identity takes precedent.

"*Alpha,"* one states.

"**Beta.**"

"*Gamma."*

"Delta."

"Epsilon."

"*Howsabout Iota?"*

"Lambda!"

"NU!"

"OMEGA."

The one standing tallest, the one who identified herself as Alpha, looks down and picks up a double bladed sword. Giving it a test swing, the mouth of the MP Eva curls backwards, showing massive blunt teeth.

"*Kick. Ass.*" she says, holding it in one hand over her shoulder, "*Alright, girls. Let's rock."*

...

The Mark 09 shrieks, tossing off Unit 04a before arching back. The plates on its chest retract, a set of three prongs extending from around the red core. Space shifts, a ball of white rimmed with black appearing before lancing out into a beam of white light that blasts through the ceiling of the testing grounds, blasting through layer after layer of armor before drilling a hole to the surface.

Blasting through, it leaps, clearing the surface and landing on the landing strip in a crouch. Rising, it sniffs the air, turning to the hole as the technicians and workers evacuate screaming, VTOL craft rising and painting it with red targeting lasers.

"*Clear the area! All of you, get out of here!"*

Unit 04a flies out of the hole, chain guns popping out of its forearms as it fires, punching through the armor as the True Evangelion screams and returns fire, blasting the Unit in the chest and sending it flying across the air strip.

It leaps into the air, legs and arms folding out, joints exposed that twist on themselves as the entire Evangelion twists in shape. Two metal wings fold out, straightening and solidifying, jets exposed over its surface pushing down with thrust. The arms and legs form into a long barrel, exposing a glowing core and the prongs of its build in Dirac Array.

All of it pointing to it taking the form of a giant, free-floating cannon, which Kei spots through the haze just as the barrel begins to light up.

And then a black lance spears the barrel, narrowly missing the core.

Nine shapes, circling the Mark 09, overshadow them. Wings flap, before two of them fold in their wings and dive. Two of the MP Evas descend feet first, catching the Mark 09 in the chest as it converts back to human mode and dragging it to the ground before the True Evangelion grabs them by the ankles and slams them both into the ground.

A lance comes from the sky, impaling it through the chest, but it does not falter, roaring before grabbing the two fallen white giants and hurling them at the flock.

Inside the entry plug, Kei grimaces. The girls need to work on their teamwork, she muses, as several of them drop from the sky. She will have to talk with Grandfather about giving them more time in the Evas so they have better control.

Of course, that's moot right now.

"A9 EK-02!"

"*That's Alpha, Mother!"*

Kei sighs. Already they're taking names. Well, it's healthy, maybe. If it didn't involve gigantic alien cyborgs.

"Alpha, do you have an attack strategy?"

Silence from the other end.

"You so take after your father," she sighs, urging Unit 04a forward and into a charge, "Cover me! Flank the Mark 09!"

The lead MP Eva dives, blade first. Slamming blade first, she slices into the Mark 09's armor, the True Evangelion roaring before grabbing her by the face, crushing the jaw. Kei growls, willing the jets online and slamming into the Mark 09 at half the speed of sound. For her credit, the Mark 09 is staggered, stumbling back before Kei grabs the dropping sword and slams the blunt side of it into the Mark 09's face, denting armor and taking out one of the eyes.

"Hands off the girl," Kei growls.

Another swing and the Mark 09's arm severs at the forearm, dropping the MP Eva as it reaches out and grabs Unit 04a's throat with its other hand. She can feel the heat building up inside it, the shoulder jet strips glowing as the secondary plasma weapons on the True Evangelion come online.

"Excuse me."

A blur and a black fist slams into the Mark 09's face, shattering the armor and teeth, an orange flow folding out into several AT Fields which send the Mark 09 flying.

Descending from on high, a halo of light hovering above its head, the Mark 06's visor glows baleful red. Inside the Entry Plug, Kaworu Nagisa grinds his teeth, extending his mind and his will. It manifests within the right hand of his chariot, taking the form of an orange spear composed entirely of light.

"Evangelions," he says, "Follow my lead."

He hurls the spear. It penetrates armor, flesh, and wraps around the

Core, slamming the Makr 09 against the ground as the light wraps in tendrils around the True Evangelion's heart. It roars, opening fire with every weapon, deflected off of the AT Field manifesting before the Mark 06.

"Now."

The remaining MP Evas raise their sword. As one, they flow out, metamorphing into their secondary forms as the Replica Lances, and fly. They slide into the arms, and legs, and head, pinning the Eva to the ground as it shrieks and screams.

And finally, goes silent.

...

Gendo checks his PDA, muttering to himself over the sounds of screaming, metal slamming against wood and flesh, and other sounds of assorted carnage coming from the other room as the door opens and Misato Katsuragi walks in. She stares at Annette, who smiles back and offers her a cup of tea.

"You're an Ikari, so I'm not surprised," Misato says, and takes a sip, staring at the cup, "Huh. Scotch?"

"Chairman Kihl's private stock. I figured you'd appreciate it."

Misato smiles and pats the girl on the head, turning to the Commander.

"Yeah, your niece just saved your testicles, Commander," Misato says, "Care to explain to me why I got hit by a van?"

"Everything has a reason," Gendo responds, not looking up from his PDA, "Ah, yes. Go-kun's avatar body in the next room?"

Misato nods.

"**GIVE ME YOUR FACE!**"

Misato sighs, turning to the door as she hears Ritsuko scolding Go-kun and one of the cultists begging for his life while the others try to bribe him. The sounds of carnage die down, replaced by sobbing and the booming voice apologizing, before the door swings open and Ritsuko walks in.

"Go-kun's not allowed to watch movies anymore," she sighs, "Come on. The sooner we get back to NERV, the sooner we can watch Yui go off."

Sitting across from Annette, Shinji sighs.

"Of course, since I was actually kidnapped, I'm glad to see you're all so concerned," he mutters.

Misato grins, ruffling his hair before grabbing him by the arm.

"Of course I'm concerned," she says, dragging him out with her, past the tied up cultists, and out to the sports car now sitting in front of the warehouse, "If you got hurt, I'd have no one to embarrass. Now get in the car."

Gendo follows them, Annette walking next to him as Makoto peaks his head out from behind the door.

"Okay," he says, quickly walking up next to the Commander, "Now what?"

"Now we return to NERV," Gendo responds, "And ponder what we've learned. Which is where you come in."

Makoto stares at his commanding officer, blinking before shaking his head.

"Me."

"You have an outsider perspective," Gendo responds, "How would you approach the problem regarding Unit-01, considering what we now know?"

Makoto sighs, scratching the back of his head, gaze going from Misato as she stuffs Shinji in the back compartment of the car and the Commander. Sighing, he shrugs, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"Well," he says, "Well, I guess if you want perspective, it's kind of like when I was growing up with my brother. Mom was kind of like Dr. Ikari. She'd coddle us, but Dad always made sure we weren't spoiled."

"Meaning."

"Meaning, I guess," Makoto says, and sucks his teeth, "I guess that means Ichi's kind of spoiled. She's been sort of Dr. Ikari's for the past ten years, so she's kind of gotten her way. If something really bad happened, or if one of us got injured or something, we wouldn't go to

Mom to help us. She'd be all nice and all, but if it was our fault, or we needed to learn something..."

Makoto shrugs.

"We'd go to Dad, really."

...

Shinji has at this point resigned himself to the fact that he has no control of the situation. Outside of robbing a bank, being kidnapped by his father and then his cousin, and now being rescued by Misato so he can be teased about this the entire way, he decides to relax on the surprisingly soft and comfortable floor of the back seat of the sports car.

Sighing, he closes his eyes as he takes in the cool breeze from the sea just by the warehouse. Well, at least he'll be sleeping in his own bed tonight, and not on rocks and a sleeping mat like his dad intended t

You are

Red eyes open. He sits up. What was th

all of you

A distant rumble. Something stirring, something pulling at the back of his mind as he hears the steady, bubbling

Garbage.

Voice.

"Misato," Shinji yells, "We have to go! *NOW!"*

...

You are, all of you, Garbage.

You have gathered yourselves like sheep

And like sheep, can the wolf gut you all.

You are prey.

I am the hunter.

And I have been waiting for you all.

I am the Observer of God.

Angel of the Flood.

I am Tamiel.

And I am here.

It bursts from the lake, as tall as an Evangelion. For a moment, they believe it to be the Fourth Angel, Sachiel. Green flesh and sectioned, gilled white armor covers its humped back and arms, ending in blades. Upon its head, a single blue orb sits, as it turns its hook toothed mouth down towards them, and hisses as it spots them.

Enemy. Other. HIM. {unknown.}

All these words burn in the back of Shinji's mind, as he realizes he can hear it, as it stands over them.

"Okay," Misato says, "Everyone in the car. Now."

Chapter 79: Chase Scene

On the Big Screen in NERV-Berlin, they only watch the scene before them. As a reward for reigning in the Mark 09, under the careful supervision of the Mark 06, the MP Evangelions were allowed some 'play time.' They watch. Standing next to Kei, Katsuhito Ikari watches, tilting his head, as he watches it. That. He is not sure how to quantify it.

Only to state what it is: MP Evangelion-9, Aka **OMEGA,** frolicking through the Black Forest, singing a childish nursery rhyme, with a tree with red leaves ripped up from the ground and put behind its...her...ear.

And, oh yes, the other MP Evangelions are now dancing in a circle, singing Ring Around the Rosey. Except for Beta, who is practicing with her sword.

"Why?" Katsuhito asks.

"Because I am very much like my mother," Kei responds.

Chapter 79: Chase Scene

"Jesus Christ it's an Angel," Ritsuko screams, "*GET IN THE CAR!"*

Misato grabs the Commander by the arm, tossing him onto the back seat, and onto Shinji and Annette, running with Makoto as they both jump into the front seat as Ritsuko grabs shotgun. Gunning the engine, sitting on Makoto's lap, Misato slams her foot and the pedal to the floor as the tires squeal and Go-kun takes off.

Makoto is of two minds of this. On one hand, they are being chased by an Angel.

On the other hand, Misato is now sitting on his lap, but he also knows that she's armed. And she also, probably, knows he hit her with a van, so if he makes his happiness of the situation know, she will shoot him.

"Think of baseball," he says, "Think of baseball-"

"Take the wheel!" she says, turning around and straddling him, grabbing the gun from the glove compartment as Makoto desperately

tries to look past her as she begins shooting at the Angel.

Dear Penthouse, he thinks, *I never thought this would happen to me...*

...

The typical morning routine of Maya Ibuki, 1st Lieutenant, about 5th down the command chain of NERV-1, and assistant to both Dr. Yui Ikari and Dr. Ritsuko Akagi does not, despite the beliefs of many of her coworkers, involve a lot of lesbian sex. In fact, her typical morning routine does not involve any sex at all. Despite her relationship with Dr. Akagi- which is completely appropriate as she is actually part of administration, not part of Project E despite her job as Ritsuko's assistant- they have two things going for them.

First, they are both mature adults. They have better things to do than spend all their time in bed, in varied positions that would give her co-workers nosebleeds. Second, they are both busy. Especially given that Ritsuko's home is in the Geofront and Maya's is in the above ground city, most of the time they even spend together is at work, with the occasional dinner together. Lastly, neither of them are really what one would call 'kinky.'

Despite Ritsuko's insistence of bringing up the story of her sleeping with Misato in college, she also notes that it was in college. Their relationship isn't like Misato and Mr. Kaji's, or Shinji and Asuka's. It's more built on respect and familiarity if anything. She muses over this as she tightens the top of her coffee thermos, walking to the door of her apartment and turning the handle.

And finding that the handle does not work. Flipping the panel of the door handle, she types in her lock code, and finds that it, to, does not work.

"*I wanted to warn you that I have disabled all the locks in your apartment. And I have trapped you in here. But I have not filtered a deadly neurotoxin in through the vents, because that would be rude."*

The lilting, uneven voice. Well, Maya thinks, this is definitely not good.

"Naok00?"

A vent opens, and a box drops down onto her couch, in front of her tv set and game systems.

"*As I am based on Naoko Akagi and am therefor her 'child', I have concluded I must act like a big sister to Ritsuko. That includes vetting her choice of romantic partners, so I have decided to give you a test."*

Maya carefully walks over to the box. It is large, and white, and sectioned.

"*So, I have locked the doors, windows, and refrigerator, to determine if you are able to survive without feeding on the soul source of food in the apartment, which would be a bad thing."*

Maya opens the box, reaches in, and holds up the food source, which stares at her with measured, knowing disdain.

"Mr. Fluffles?"

...

The single light of the room blinks on, shining down upon Yui Ikari as she enters. The other monoliths are silent, save for the one labeled 06. Sighing, she thrusts her hands in her labcoat pockets and waits, to see if there is an acknowledgment, or if her father simply forgot to turn it off.

"Dad," she says.

"*I'm here, Yui. I'm just on voice because I'm not in my office. What do you need?"*

"I wanted you to know we're making excellent progress on Eva Unit 07. Although, we may need a new commander soon, as I may have to murder Gendo."

"*I have heard as much. If one thing has struck me about your husband, though, is that he always has a good reason for doing what he does."*

"I am quivering with anticipation as to what this is," she deadpans, taking the bottle of water out of her lab coat and taking a sip, "We're still not sure what stabilized the girls. You received my request?"

"*I did, Yui. Although, I am puzzled. Why do you not want the rest of your daughters considered for Child status? Rei and Kei have both worked out*

wonderfully."

"Yes. But we don't have enough Evangelions for all for all of them," Yui sighs, studiously checking her fingernails, "Also, try to consider what would happen if you gave Nana or Hatchi an Evangelion."

Silence, from the other end. Maybe some coughing, and a throat clearing.

"*I see your point. That would not be good. And perhaps able to be seen from orbit."*

"Yes. Speaking of which, Dad, what happened with the Mark 09?"

"*The Mark 09 was equipped with a Synthesis based soul. It was overwhelmed by the systems built into the Mark 09 and went berserk. We are researching alternatives. I must say, though, Kei and her new systems worked perfectly."*

"Yes, I heard as much. But, she is Kei. I expect if anyone could pull it off, she could."

Yui allows herself a smile. A bit of pride in her in the accomplishments of her daughter, as she folds her arms and taps her foot.

"By the way, where are you?"

...

"I'm in Brazil," Katsuhito says, adjusting the collar of his jacket, the bluetooth device in his ear blinking steadily, "I decided to investigate the Angel which showed up over the Amazon myself. Yes, Yui, I have taken every precaution. Yes, I have gotten all my shots. And I have many, many soldiers looking out for me."

A call from the distance. Sighing, he looks up. The ring is in the distance, a massive Ouroboros loop hovering over the renewed rainforest. He wants to get up to it, to study it. Every fiber of his being, the essence of him that is the scientist, sings upon the sight of it.

"Professor Ikari?"

Jenny, the assistant who was with him at Berlin, walks up. She's in

khaki pants and a jacket, and is a good bit younger than his daughter. She hands him the PDA, and he nods, looking over the information on it.

"I see," he intones, "Very interesting. It just appeared?"

"Current consensus is that this is the reason the Angel has been non-hostile," she says, "It's not just terraforming, but excavating."

She leads him on, down the forested expanse to a clearing that other personnel are gathered at. Around fifteen of them- trusted assistants. Some his age, some younger than Jenny, all of them operating with his explicit trust and all in on the conspiracy. And all of them are completely baffled, standing around a perfect circle, dug out by what they can tell was the environment itself, operating in tandem with the hovering Angel.

"It looks like ADAM," Jenny says.

It is twenty feet tall. Its skin is iridescent and glowing, the only parts not radiating the dim circle in its chest which they figure is a Core, and the eyes, which remain open and yet empty.

"What is that?" Katsuhito asks, stepping forward, locking eyes with the creature as it remains silent, "Record everything. Then seal it to maximum classification. We need to study...this."

His assistants, ever faithful and unquestioning, nod as they begin their work. And as they do, Katsuhito stares at it, watching and wondering. This, he thinks, is not what he expected.

...

Shinji sits up in the back seat, looks at the charging monster, and shrieks like a girl. It is noted that the pitch of his scream is actually higher than Annette's. Gendo, on the other hand, has begun shooting at the creature with his service pistol, joining in the general barrage that Misato had started while straddling Makoto.

"It's gaining," Shinji yells, "Must go faster! Must go faster!"

Through it all, Ritsuko has been tapping on the glowing panel on her lab coat's left wrist.

"Misato, shield your eyes," she says, "Lieutenant. Floor it."

The car accelerates, the canopy of the roof folding out and covering them as the gray clouds above them split. Which is, providence be, when a beam of white lances out from the sky and consumes the Cherubim, the creature shrieking as the ground melts to glass around it and the air fills with the stench of burning meat.

"Sweet," Misato, "What'd you do?"

"Hacked and took control of a JSSDF Ion Cannon satellite," Ritsuko responds, "That should-"

Skin blackened, Tamiel roars and begins running after them again.

"Never mind! Plan B!"

Makoto floors the accelerator, Go-kun grumbling an agreement as the car takes off.

...

"Asuka?"

Flicking off the orange hologram on her right wrist, she turns from the raised platform overlooking Unit-07's partially constructed thigh to see Yui approaching. Yui is rewarded with a faint smile, which is at least an improvement. Following the revelations in New Vegas, their relationship had been strained; at very least, the older woman has been taking steps to repair her bridges.

"What's our progress?" Yui asks.

"N-nothing out of the ordinary," Asuka responds, "Cell generation is n-nominal. Do we have any word on..."

"Not yet," Yui responds, "But from what I can tell, no one's in any real danger. Misato will call me if anything changes. She's very professional about taking care of you and Shinji."

Both nod, going silent. Yui taps her foot, and sighs.

"Asuka, Kyoko wanted to see you if you've got a moment," Yui says, "I'll take over here."

Asuka nods, tapping her PDA closed, and walks down the ramp and out of the construction area, walking down the hallway and towards the lifts. Tapping the button for her mother's floor, she waits, completely silent, as the lift speeds up to the office floors.

She does not say a word. Inside, in the depths of her mind, she begins cycling through scenarios of what Mother wants. But, she stops herself before the scenarios get too dark. She is still scared of her. Still intimidated by her. Mother has tried in these past months to fix things, but a few weeks does not fix sixteen years.

Rubbing her temples, she sighs, and pushes it all back like she always does. She puts on the smile she wears, which is much more genuine than it ever has been, and walks out of the elevator as the door opens. Navigating by memory down the hallway, she stops as the office and the door swings open. Kyoko looks up and smiles faintly, motioning her in as she taps open another requisition form.

"I'll cut right to the chase," she says, "Asuka, your father and I are getting remarried. I'd like you to be the maid of honor."

...

"And then what happened?" Yui asks.

"Then she started *hyperventilating,*" Kyoko moans, leaning against the liquor cabinet in the Mausoleum, pouring herself another shot of scotch as Yui watches with concern, "She was like a *deer in headlights.* I thought her brain *broke*. I had to get Makinami in there to get her down to the infirmary before she fainted!"

She's had at least three shots at this point. Staring at the glass, her hand trembles before she pulls away, leaving the drink on the table.

"It's been better," Kyoko says, "But it doesn't make up for seventeen years. I'm just lucky I didn't die in a car accident like my mother did, so I can actually try to fix things."

She sighs, and her shoulder sag, walking over to one of the chairs near the commander's desk and sitting, Yui still leaning on the edge of the desk as she watches her colleague.

"I'm going to take the girl in," Kyoko says, "Zophael, that is. I was going to suggest to Asuka that she move in with me and Pieter after

we get married, but I don't think that's right. Not yet."

Kyoko folds her hands out, resting her face in them. She composes herself quickly- even in light of the closer relationship she now shares with Yui, she still will not let anyone see her cry. Those habits are still hard to break.

Still, Yui reaches out, and squeezes her shoulder.

"We should get back to work," Kyoko sighs, "We need to finish the Eva."

She sits up, rubbing her face, and looks up at Yui once again.

"Has anyone seen Ibuki, today?"

^v=!

Lilly appears, hovering over the desk before spreading out into a flat disc. The cat falls out first, landing on all fours on the desk and mewling, before the arm of Maya Ibuki grips the side of the portal and pulls herself through before crashing into a heap next to Yui.

"Doctor Ikari," she asks, "Do we want to talk about why the MAGI tried to get me to eat Sempai's cat?"

...

Following her release from the infirmary, Asuka used her temporary access to Sheol for a good reason. Said reason is sitting in a metal folding chair in the middle of the room. From what they can tell, she never used the bed, or the toilet or shower stall. Her own field keeps her from getting dirty or even apparently her needing to do anything. She has not eaten, had not had a drop of any liquid, but is as healthy as the day they found her.

Lilith stares at her, but says nothing. Asuka knows she went after Shinji during her attack. She went after him as if he were her target. Her prize.

But Asuka says nothing, turning from the two way window and walking to the next isolation cell. As if a contrast, she is there. Red hair where Lilith's is white and blue, eyes blue where Lilith's is red. In many ways, Asuka is a counterpoint to Rei, and the same could be

said in how Zophael is a counterpoint to Lilith. Not only that, the girl is sitting on the bed, tapping her PDA furiously, two sticks of pocky jammed in her mouth, the box itself on the tray at her feet.

Asuka taps on the window, smiling despite herself. All the physical tests say that Zophael's body is physically fourteen. When she was fourteen, she was finishing up at the university. And flogging herself with a belt on her birthday when she was left home alone and Uri had to do a test *and stop thinking that.*

The door opens, and Asuka walks in, Zophael looking up from the PDA.

"How are you doing?" Asuka asks.

Zophael's responds is to finish chewing and swallow, smiling brightly as Asuka takes a chair and sits across from her.

"So far so good," Zophael responds, "This is fascinating. It really is. Your people are a truly wise and intelligent life form!"

Asuka looks at the PDA, and raises her eyebrows.

"*Bejeweled.*"

"Yes."

"I th-thought you were researching culture. You're playing flash games?"

Zophael nods.

"Aren't y-you interested in human history or culture?"

Zophael shrugs.

"Meh," she says, and powers down the PDA, "I tried. It wasn't interesting. We aren't really interested in those things. Father wasn't, at least. He never showed interest in those beneath."

"Beneath," Asuka muses, "Wait...father. You mean ADAM?"

Zophael nods, seemingly curling inward. As if afraid of something.

"Zophie," Asuka says, "How much do you know about ADAM? D-did you have any memories from b-before?"

Zophael nods.

"I can show you, if you like," she says, "I know everything. Just like all the other Angels do. We all know what Father is. We all know why He becomes so angry. I'd actually kind of like it if you went with me. I don't like seeing it alone."

Asuka nods.

"Show me. P-please."

And Zophael's eyes begin to glow as the room turns liquid

...

There is a dissonant serenity to the situation, Shinji muses. This is possibly the most time he's spent with his father in a very long time. In fact, he feels closer to the man than he has in a long time. This is most likely rooted in how he's handing his father clips to reload, despite the fact that the constant gunfire doesn't seem to be doing anything to the Angel that is chasing them.

"Reload."

"I think the best we're doing is pissing it off!" Shinji snaps back.

"It's all a matter of remaining focused," Gendo responds, and grimaces as the car bumps, "Lieutenant, avoid any sharp turns."

Womanly screaming, which is not coming from Misato, is the only answer they get.

"Dad, it's kinda gaining!" Shinji screams.

And indeed, it is. The car now barely outpaces the impacts of the triangular feet on the ground, the huffing and grinding coming from the 60 meter tall creature's vented face sending blasts of steam and rotted meat their direction.

Wuffletron 9000, engaging!

Four blasts of light lance into the Angel's face, making it roar before a green and brown blur slams into it at high speed. It stumbles back, as they see the shape of Junior's mecha body before the robot opens its mouth and sends a blast of superheated plasma directly into Tamiel's

eye.

Our apologies for being late. We had to find some, as Pieter puts it, friends.

A flurry of missiles impact, just as the first of the fleet of VTOLs fly past, strafing the Angel as it roars. It swats at them, blinded, as the first of the tanks roll past Go-kun and begin opening fire, painting it with explosions before it turns and begins running.

"That's bizarre," Ritsuko says, "You'd figure it would use its AT Field."

"Yeah, I ain't complaining," Misato says, and turns to the wheel, "Go-kun! We're safe!"

The car stops, Misato climbing off the motionless Makoto as the sedan stops next to them and Pieter climbs out.

"Junior sensed the Angel," he says, "I called in some favors with the JSSDF."

Misato salutes, as Gendo hops out of the back seat.

"Good work," he says, as the splash in the distance marks the Angel diving into the sea, "Get us back to NERV-1 and tell Project E to prep an entry plug. We need access to Unit-01."

Pieter nods, and nods to Misato.

"Yeah, one thing before we head over," he says, "Commander, the official story was that you were kidnapped. We need to dispel any suspicion of the fact. I hope you don't mind."

"Do what you need to, Sohryu," Gendo responds.

Pieter nods, and pistol whips the Commander.

...

It is a testament to her mothering abilities that Yui does not scream, cry out, or shout when she enters Cage 3 to find the entire facility painted pink and blue and purple. Standing on the catwalks in front of Unit-01, which has gone back to silent and brooding, her seven daughters hide the paint brushes and cans behind them.

"Why?" Yui asks.

"Because we thought if we cheered up the place, that'd cheer up Ichi!" Kiko responds. Ah, yes, Yui thinks, this idea would be Kiko's.

"Okay, fine," Yui sighs, and pinches the bridge of her nose, "Okay, we have a situation. Your father is on his way back. Then, he and I have to go to Germany and attend Chairman Kihl's funeral. And Rei is requested to attend."

Yui closes her eyes, puts her hand over her face, and begins begins moving her finger back and forth.

"...my mother told me to pick this one..."

She opens her eyes. Immediately, she wishes she hadn't, but, fair is fair.

"Okay," she says, "Until we get back. Nana, you will pilot Go-kun."

Nana makes a sound reminiscent of air escaping from a balloon, and Yui remembers her words to her father about handing an Evangelion to her explosion-worshipping daughter.

"Only if an Angel attacks," Yui adds.

She sighs, and checks her PDA.

"Alright," she says, "It's me, your father, Rei, Uri, and Kyoko going to Germany. Everyone else is here, including your brother. So, nothing I have to hear about while we're gone, okay? I can trust everyone to be good?"

"We promise," Hatchi says.

And with that, Yui walks out. At very least, she'll get to see her other daughter again. She's finding herself looking forward to seeing Kei.

...

The world fades into the aether. What was a holding cell deep within Dogma and Sheol becomes a field of white, like flowers from a distance. But not flowers. Flowers give way to towers, each stretching to a ground so far distant that it is beneath clouds, and the petals are bulbs.

Bulbs the size, she realizes, of the Geofront.

"What is this?"

The origin, Asuka.

Where there was a girl there is a bird of light. And for a moment, Asuka feels a familiarity, a deep recognition tinged by fear.

We all have the memories. We all have the knowledge of what made the Father.

"But...but Junior said he didn't have those memories."

Junior lied.

They go in. The field becomes a sphere, filled with something resembling water. At the center, like the embryo in a sonogram, there is a figure. A white, iridescent figure, glowing and human like, the shoulders bearing extensions like the fins of an Eva, the only points not glowing the black cool areas where the eyes and Core are.

"ADAM."

Father. As He was made. As a tool.

The egg shifts as it is released, the stars speeding past. The Giant of Light stirs, uncurling, standing upright. It stands 60 meters all. Asuka knows what it is, knows she should be very, very afraid of this, even if it is just a memory.

But as the Giant holds out its hand, towards the light of where it was born as it recedes into the distance, she can't help but feel sympathy towards it. As the First Angel turns from what was once its home to the great beyond, He extends a hand. Light curls downward and outward, forming into something resembling itself.

Twenty feet tall. It is a miniature of ADAM, but the ADAM they fought, complete with the restraints and the armor that it was given when He was found.

"Zophie...what is that?"

A Throne. Each progeny of the White Egg is created to serve a need. Archangels to protect ADAM from Pain and complete with Him. Cherubim to unleash His rage. Dominions to shelter Him from fear.

"What do Thrones do?"

Ease His loneliness.

And then, the Giant of Light turns to them. He tilts His head, the black orbs that are His eyes directed at them.

And then the memory burns away

And Asuka falls onto her seat. The chair is tipped sideways, and Zophael is staring at her, tears already running down her cheeks. She says nothing, picking up her PDA, and taps it open again.

"Was...He always like that?"

"Yeah," Zophael sighs, "Yeah. But, well, He's a tool. Just like all of us. As much as we try to, y'know, humanize ourselves, I'm still not human. Even if I'm shaped like one. Chances are I'll get dissected at some point, so it's pointless to fight it. You know?"

The PDA is taken out of her hand, and Asuka grabs her by the wrist.

"Come with me," she says.

Asuka smiles, faintly, and Zophael cannot help but return the smile, even in part.

"Where are we going?" the angel asks.

"To s-see Dr. Ikari," Asuka responds, "And then our mother."

"Our?"

"You're body's b-based on mine," Asuka says, "So you're my little sister. A-and if Shinji's anything to work b-by, I think it's my job to protect you."

Asuka smiles, a little wider.

"Let's go home."

...

The car pulls in to the space, the floor parting and the lift sliding down. Sitting next to Annette, Shinji does not both looking out to the

expanse of the Geofront, for he knows what awaits him. Death, maiming, and if Zyuu has her way, incest. It is the soft realization that not only are Mom and Dad heading to Berlin, leaving Misato in charge of NERV, but Mom has also given the Ree charge of Go-kun.

He hopes they've started sketching up Tokyo-4.

"Well, we're here," Misato says, hopping over the door, "Thanks for the lift, Go-kun!"

Shinji sighs as the car powers down, climbing out of the back seat, Annette trailing behind him as Gendo walks ahead. Mom is waiting at the entrance to the garage, her arms folded and her face an emotionless mask. Except, of course, for her eyes.

"You had Makoto pistol whip you to make it look like you were kidnapped."

"No, I had Sohryu do it," Gendo responds, "I felt I owed him for the business with Mari."

"Of course. And why should I not pistol whip you?"

Makoto is still frozen in the driver's seat, Shinji observes. He would have figured he'd enjoy that, more. Instead, Shinji sighs, walking past his parents as they discuss the situation, walking down to the hallways that will lead him to a lift to the surface and his own bed.

"Hey there, Shinji!"

He looks up, and freezes. Clad in a green, red piped plugsuit, Mana Kirishima walks past, furiously picking at her ass crack.

"I don't know how you f_ing do it," she growls, "But this thing keeps riding up! Do you keep your undies on when you suit up, or do you go commando?"

He isn't sure why he's not noticing the definition of said ass or the fact that Mana's bust is a bit smaller than Asuka's own. Oh, right, he chides himself. Because it isn't Asuka's. He'd blame the fact on him not being completely human anymore, but he wasn't like that when he was human, either.

Then again, Dad is surrounded by Misato, women in miniskirts and just about every female employee at NERV is under 35, and he's been faithful to Mom for the past twenty years. It might be genetic.

"I wear boxers, actually," he says, "Are they holding a synch test, yet?"

"Tomorrow," Mana says, folding her arms under her bust, "They're rebuilding JAP as an Eva. So I'm going to be the Seventh Child. Which is weird, since the Ree are stable."

"Do you want to give my sisters an Eva?"

"Point," she says, and shrugs, "Right, go find Asuka. She's probably looking for you."

He continues walking down the hallway, towards the lifts. Taking the cab up, he whistles to himself as he rides it to the surface, at this point such a familiar sight that fellow passengers don't give him odd looks, despite being a male version of Rei. That is both the beauty and horror of living in Tokyo-3- the familiarity with the ridiculous.

And he just thought that, he realizes with a grimace. He's getting more Ree-like by the day.

A quick bus ride from the tram station on the surface and he's back at the apartment building, where his phone, his wallet, and everything else that he left behind when Dad kidnapped him is. A quick elevator ride to the floor, and he sighs in relief as he steps up to the door.

Which then opens, Pen Pen squawking in outrage before running out.

"Get back here, you dumb bird!"

Clad in an apron, with a spatula and a rolling pin in her hands, Zophael runs out- and nearly over Shinji.

"It's not *my* fault you're roasting size!"

She runs after the bird, and Shinji watches before sighing and being, inwardly, glad the girl didn't take out her wrath on him. And finally relaxed, shoulders rolled back, he steps in.

"I'm home."

...

He sensed it. He sensed the link, the intrusion. He sensed the memory, and saw them in the memory. He remembers everything, for that is His function. To record. To direct. To create and restore. Already, He

sees them, all of them. The cycles that have played out and the two concurrently playing out.

He partitioned a portion of Himself, animating the half angel, and wills that portion to life once again, awakening the boy as he drifts on the Pacific. He reads the Overmind of Armisael, hovering over the Amazon, and is satisfied for some reason. That child has found a purpose that is not simple hate or destruction of completion. Is it Pride? Does He feel Pride that a child has found a purpose?

Maybe.

But that is a thought for another time. He will observe. He will catalogue and judge.

But for right now, He will sleep. And so, adrift in the Dirac, memories playing before His eyes, the Giant once more drifts off into slumber.

And in the Pacific, a half angel child who has been asleep for days opens his eyes once more.

Chapter 80: Asuka's Sister is a Big Fat Bitch

The middle school uniform of the local middle school, which occupies the bottom two floors of the Tokyo-3 municipal High School, is a green skirt and vest, with the skirt going down to the knees, and a white shirt with a sort of red tie thing. The boys uniform is simply black pants and a white button shirt, which does suggest that whoever designed the middle school uniforms has a fetish.

Needless to say, Class 2A, located on the second floor of the school building, looks up from their normal morning revelry to find their new classmate standing in front of them. She has written her name on the board using her newfound understanding of German, and hence none of them can read it. However, they can read her. Fourteen years old, well developed for a fourteen year old, with reddish blonde hair falling down her shoulders and two barrettes that resemble Evangelion-issue A-10 connectors in her hair with the price sticker still on them, she flashes her blue eyes and a large, toothy grin.

"Hi there," she says, "I'm Zophie Sohryu Shikigami. It's a pleasure to meet you. And a word to the boys. You touch me?"

She slams her fist into her palm.

"I *touch you*. Twice as hard."

In the doorway, watching as she proceeds to her seat, Misato snickers and turns to Kyoko.

"Oh my, she's a lovely shade of *Tsundere,*" Misato says, slapping Kyoko on the back as they proceed to walk back towards the stairs, "I can't see this going wrong at all, Kyoko. It's a wonderful idea."

"Your sarcasm is dripping on the floor, Katsuragi," Kyoko growls, "Don't worry, this is under control. Section 2 is monitoring the classroom and I have one of the Ree hiding in the ductwork. Kiko was very eager to take the job."

"Oh God-"

"So I asked Zyuu to do it instead," Kyoko says, and smile, "Let's see how this works for a day. If we can normalize her and socialize her, she will be an invaluable asset to NERV."

Misato snickers again.

"Man, you're full of it," she says, and slaps Kyoko on the back again, the woman glaring at her, "You just want a do over on being a Mom."

Chapter 80: Asuka's Sister is a Big Fat Bitch

The picture is of a gigantic Koala which has been slices open from gullet to groin by the skeletal humanoid apparently constructed of car parts and a set of buzz saws for hands. As much as she looks at it, Asuka cannot figure out what is *wrong* with that picture. Is it the wide smile on the girl's face? Is it the size of the koala? Is it everything at once?

She'll go for that last one.

"Who is that?"

"That's one of the Reego," Shinji explains, "You remember them?"

Asuka nods.

"They're in Australia," she responds, "It s-seems they've been busy."

Shinji nods.

"They regularly contact the Ree and Go-kun," he says, "Kiko and Zyuu have been giving them a lot of advice. Nana helps them with weapon designs. From what I can tell, Rei's really proud of her ***babies.***"

The two stop, freeze up, and stare at each other.

"Wh-what did you just say?" Asuka asks.

"I was just talking about Rei's ***babies.*** Oh crap."

He sighs, rubbing his temples with his thumbs.

"Right, I was trying to talk about Rei's ***babies*** and when I want to call them ***babies*** they come out as ***babies.*** That does not sound right at all."

Asuka nods.

"So...when you mean to say 'daughters,'" she starts.

"It comes out...d..." He grits his teeth, biting his lip, "***Babies.*** Crap."

Asuka nods.

"Y-your Reeishness is showing."

It's around then that they notice the rest of the class is now staring at them. Shakily, Shinji smiles. Slowly, he stands up, grabbing the notebook computer and stuffing it into his bag as he scans the room.

"Let's go find Rei."

...

The fact of the matter was that Rei was leaving the next day with the Commander, Dr. Ikari, Dr. Sohryu, Uri, and Annette for Germany, to attend the funeral of the man, if Yui was to believed, tried to kill them all by infecting Unit 03 with a homicidal Cherubim. They presume Rei was going to come to desecrate the corpse, as they can't really think of any other reason for bringing her to a polite function.

Of course, this was also probably the reason the other girls were staying behind. Kei was one matter. Rei and Kei get along well enough, but Kei might still have hard feelings, and was never the best at expressing them. Rei was the least likely to tackle hug her.

Or at least, *less* likely than Kiko.

Which made the current revelation that Misato was dealing with all the more problematic. Standing in the briefing room, arms folded and eyes wide, she stares at the pictures on the screen. Yui has already excused herself from the room, muttering gibberish that she usually does.

"What the Hell am I looking at?" Misato asks.

"The main reason muggings have gone down in the Tokyo-3 municipal park," Ritsuko responds, tapping on her PDA as the picture enlarges, "Apparently, the girls have decided to take up...hobbies. For lack of a better term. Once they got out of Sheol...well, once they got out of Sheol, they decided to team up and Fight Crime."

The image zooms in to Kiko, dressed in a tight fitting sailor fuku,

holding a sort of decorative mace which they have analyzed as being able to focus and project her AT Field into a variety of shapes, and standing over a half dozen unconscious people.

"Section 2 has labeled her Sailor Ree."

"What."

The image shifts again. Two of them, one of them in black, the other in bright red and green with capes trailing behind them as they descend upon a man holding a couple at gunpoint.

"Siyon and Zyuu have decided to emulate Batman and Robin, respectfully."

"Hatchi?"

Another image flashes by.

"Yeah, the Americans will be pissed at us for that one," Misato says.

"It was impressive construction on the shield, though," Ritsuko responds, "I'm more impressed by Nana, though. After we confronted the Ree on it, Nana surrendered the battlesuit. We're adding some of those enhancements to Mana's SUIT."

"Uh huh."

"Such as flight capability, repulsor devices in the hands," Ritsuko says, and shuts off the projector, "Iti and Rei didn't participate, but Rei's been working on a plugsuit similar to Asuka's own design. We might make a similar one for Shinji and Uri. Can't hurt to have them able to protect themselves outside of an Eva."

Misato groans in response, pinching her nose, before her PDA chimes.

"Right. Gotta check in with the boss," she sighs, "Well, guess we need to round up the girls and have them *not* play vigilante with the fragile, fluid filled humans they have to share Tokyo-3 with."

She turns on her heel and walks out. Which is just when her phone rings with Asuka telling her what happened at the school.

...

They found Rei. After a fashion. More particularly, they followed Rei's cell phone tracer, which was done by Asuka's PDA and the GPS feature. The problem was, they found Touji as well.

"Yeah, I was lookin' for Hikari," the athlete says, holding the flashlight as Asuka leads them down into the school basement.

The silence is awkward, to put it mildly. Shinji and Touji had not had a chance to talk, even at the beach, what with giant crabs and Uri punching Shinji over his sticking it in, so it is with trepidation that Shinji clears his throat to broach the subject.

"Uh...I thought you'd be mad," Shinji says.

"Nah," Touji mutters, smacking him on the back, "About Hikari trying to break you in? Nah, I ain't mad about that."

"B-break him in," Asuka says, staring at Touji.

"Yeah, when every girl at the school tried to ride your meat train, I knew something was up," Touji responds, "'Sides which, Rei explained it to me, so I knew it wasn't your fault."

"Uh huh," Shinji says, "Rei. Explained it."

Touji nods.

"Yeah," he says, "You were emittin' an Anti-AT Field which caused people to lose inhibitions, especially towards you."

The two blink, staring at Touji.

"Y-you understood that?" Asuka asks.

"All of it?" Shinji adds.

Touji snorts and wipes his nose with his sleeve, shrugging before turning the flashlight back onto the depths of the basement.

"I was on the fast track ta become a pilot, ya know," he says, "I ain't stupid."

Coming to a door which they weren't sure they ever say before, Asuka looks at her PDA and nods. And Touji opens the door, and they step in. Which is when the lights turn on.

What Shinji notices first is the horn. The purple horn, in fact, which

ends at the snout of Evangelion Unit-01, or as he has come to call her, Ichi. In fact, the very fact that there is now an Evangelion in the basement of the school isn't the only thing that is bothering him.

No, that would be the floor beginning a descent once they step on it, traveling down the entire height of the kneeling Unit-01, and ending at a large round metal table, upon which is is mounted a holographic projection of the globe, and in nine of the thirteen bucket seats are sitting the Ree and Hikari. And Kensuke.

"Welcome!" Rei exclaims, "You've found our secret hideout!"

The three newcomers blink. Touji looks up and waves at Unit-01, although he is relieved that the Evangelion does not wave back.

"Okay," Asuka says, "Wh-what."

"This is the super-secret hideout," Rei says, "Of the R.E.E. Brigade!"

"R.E.E.?" Shinji asks.

"Resplendent Energetic avEngers!" the Ree respond, at once.

"Avenging what?" Touji asks.

Rei shrugs.

"Dunno," she responds, eyes tracking Touji as he walks over to Hikari, who is typing up the minutes of the meeting on her laptop, "We were just waiting for you three so we could begin!"

"Begin what?" Asuka asks.

"Our plan," Rei says, chuckling darkly, "To take over the world!"

All the Ree begin cackling, except for Iti.

"Really?" Asuka asks.

"No," Shinji responds, "Now that I'm getting a lot more reeish and I can't believe I said that word, I can get a lot more into Rei's mindset. She's not taking over the world."

Rei shrugs, skipping over to them.

"So," she says, "Whatcha need?"

Rei will join them in the next few hours. Either she's going to take a scramjet with Kyoko, Pieter, Gendo, and Mari, or she's going to take Lilly over. In all honesty, she's not sure what's more worrying- the fact that Rei may be alone with at least one person whom in the past has earned Special Friend status, or that she's apparently tamed an Einstein Rosen Bridge. Well, at least her father will be there to make sure she doesn't hijack the plane and fly it to Paraguay or Toronto.

Still, as the door opens to the Berlin international airport and she steps out, the cool seasonal air of the German republic greeting her. She hefts her carry on bag, all twenty pounds of it, on her shoulder, the complimentary bottle of water in her hand as she walks down the walkway.

There are butterflies in her stomach. Inwardly, she damns Kihl again for dying.

She is not ready for this. Phone and email was enough, but this...*this*...she isn't ready for. Sucking her teeth as she waits on the line at Customs and Immigration, she considers going back. She can charter a plane easy, but that would be running away. She will not run away.

And so, after collecting her suitcase, Yui Ikari walks onto the reception area of the airport. People mill about, meeting loved ones, meeting chauffeurs and taxis. Business as usual, and it is one of those occasions where the strangeness of Yui's family is again an advantage. She sees the blue hair easily, standing out in the crowd, holding up a laminated sign with the name "IKARI" spelled out on it.

The differences are clear to any passerby. Where Yui is dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans, Kei is in a black, striped dress suit. Where Yui is fatigued from the long flight, Kei has an air of serenity about her, except for the sight twitching around her eyes and her knuckles around the sign.

But as they come within range of each other, both begin to relax, with Yui holding her bags and Kei lowering the sign.

"Kei," Yui says, and smiles.

Kei allows herself a smile, folding the sign and holding it behind her.

"Mom," she responds, "Let me help you with those."

She walks over, effortlessly picking up Yui's suitcase. Or at least, until she puts the bag down and mother and daughter hug.

...

"Sooo~ooo the idea was that this facility is actually a forward launch base built under the school," Rei says, leading them underneath the kneeling Unit 01, "Originally, Little Mommy wanted back up Evangelions kinda like Jet Alone stationed here, so if an Angel, say, killed everyone in the regular Evas, we could herd the class down here and have them pick an Eva!"

Asuka is paying little attention. Instead, she is parsing her attention between Shinji, who is in an animated discussion with Nana over a set of blueprints, and at Unit 01, which is silent and looming over them.

"Rei," she says, "Wh-what is Ichi doing down here?"

Rei shrugs.

"Well, originally we were gonna have her come to the clubhouse in an Avatar body. But she hasn't been using Avatars since Vegas, so we brought here here instead."

The lilt in Rei's voice is not present when she talks about Ichi, Asuka notices. Rei is as concerned about her as everyone else is. Unit-01 remains silent, just as always.

"W-well, she has been getting better," Asuka says, "She s-saved Dr. Ikari from Lilith. And she does respond, s-sometimes."

Rei shrugs, as behind Asuka, Shinji and Nana have begun grabbing fireworks from around the facility.

"Yeah. Well, we want to cheer up our sister, sooo~oo-"

An explosion at the table, sending up smoke and a flash of light, followed by cackling from Nana and, as Asuka notices, Shinji.

"Sooo~ooo *that's* why you're down here," Rei says.

...

During study hall, one of the boys of the class tried to approach Zophael, apparently to ask her out. Zophie was busy playing flash games on her PDA, and responded with a rather impressive high kick to the boy's face. Prior to that, when the teacher was rambling on about life before Second Impact, she would be constantly raising her hand to ask if he had an exact toll of the dead people.

Following that, during lunch, she overhead some of the upper grade girls swooning about Shinji, who's stock at the school seems to have gone up following the whole WHUMPA aura fiasco, and also heard one of them refer to Asuka as a Gaijin Bitch. Zophie's response was to hit the girl in the face with her lunch tray.

"Well, that tears it," Kyoko says, staring at the incident report, "The girl I neglect turns out to be a gifted, sweet girl, and the girl I actively tried to raise ends up being a giant bitch."

Next to her, standing in her office, Misato shrugs.

"You don't think that it might be because she's an Angelic Hate Machine?"

"She hasn't been destructive," Kyoko sighs, running her hands through her hair, "As it is, she's been perfectly normal, if curious, around my apartment. Uri will probably get along with her, but when outside of our supervision..."

She click her remote. The screen flashes again. One video shows Zophie chasing a boy who tried to flirt with her with a baseball bat. Another video shows her dangling an upper grade boy who tried to flirt with her by his ankles from the roof top. Another shows her and Zyuu jumping some boys who were spying on Asuka and Shinji, from the tree branches above.

"Well, at least she's getting along with Zyuu," Misato says, "I mean, other than her being a big fat bitch. Want me to talk with her?"

"Yes, please. Work your maternal magic on her before we have fatality reports to fill out."

Misato clicks her heels, salutes with a smirk, and walks out.

...

She plugs in the extension cord, walking across the living room and jamming the end into the wall socket before grabbing the pile of wrinkled shirts and stalking over to the set up ironing board, standing behind the couch. Following Iruel, they had a staff therapist at NERV give her a full once over. It was to no one's surprise that they found out that she has mild OCD, although that tends to manifest sporadically. In fact, the therapist noted that she tends to go into her OCD when she is not panicking.

Which makes it reassuring to Misato when she walks into the apartment, to find a man sized pile of shirts on the couch and Asuka already ironing.

"I have no idea where you got all those shirts," Misato deadpans, "Shinji doesn't have that big a wardrobe."

Asuka sighs, flattening the collar of one of the shirts as Misato shifts the pile slightly to make room for her, before walking to the kitchen to get a beer.

"I v-volunteered to take care of Zophael and the Ree," she says, "Shinji's w-with his sisters, by the way."

"And I take it you're not too happy about that, right?"

Asuka sighs, grabbing a spray bottle of distilled water and saturating one of the shirts.

"So, your Mom and I talked it over," Misato says, popping the cap of her beer, "Zophie's going to get home schooled, and go with your Mom to NERV. We figured out that she's sweetness and candy around your mother, and a raging bitch when not in earshot of her."

She takes a pull from her beer. Another thing she's noticed, that she doesn't have a habit of one shotting her beer like she used to. Well, maybe that sort of thing happens when you actually deal with your issues, she muses.

"So," she says, "What about Zophie and your Mom? She takes her in, but not you?"
"We talked about it," Asuka sighs, "I...mm, well, I thought it was a g-good idea for Zophie to live with her. She's a Cherubim, so h-having her here, around Shinji, is a bad idea, and she'll live with Mother and Uri."

"Okay, so it's a safer idea, but hasn't your Mom ever asked you to

move in with *her*?"

"Yes," Asuka responds, slipping the ironed shirt on a hangar and hanging it underneath the board, "And I said no."

Misato arches an eyebrow, tucking her legs underneath her.

"Really?"

"Y-yeah," Asuka says, smiling slightly as she begins on the fifth shirt, "You took me in and y-you helped me, a lot. N-not just because..."

"So, not just because you're be in arms distance of your boyfriend," Misato says, placing the can on the table, "That's really sweet, Asuka. I appreciate it. But, you're a good kid. I'm happy to help."

"A-and you'll be a really good mother, someday," Asuka responds.

Misato gets up, walking around the couch and rubbing Asuka on the shoulders.

"Yeah, I think I will," she says, "I've had experience with you two. And as an added bonus, when I have my own kids, I won't have to worry about them having sex!"

Asuka turns tomato red, turning from Misato back to the shirts, as Misato cackles and hugs her. And for all the embarrassment, Asuka doesn't mind it at all. But still, there is that nagging thought in the back of her mind. Is this still running away?

...

"Sooo~ooo what you're saying is that I'm become more Reeish?" Shinji asks.

Sitting around the table with him, the Ree nod. Hikari continues taking notes, while Touji stares. It is not the fact that Shinji is surrounded by girls who look like Rei. It is the fact that Shinji is starting to speak like them that has him worried.

"So I just want to do *stuff,"* Shinji says, "And *stuff.* And when I was talking about the Reego, I couldn't call the d...d...I called them ***babies.***"

All the Ree squeal. Touji shifts in his seat, and Hikari looks up from

the typing to stare at them.

"Aaaaand that means I need a thing," he continues, "I need a *thing*. Because you have *things* you do, right?"

Rei nods.

"I do *things,*" she says, "We all do *things* for *stuff*. I do *GREAT JUSTICE!*"

"I do *BOOM!*" Nana adds.

"*Plants!* And *growing!*" Iti adds.

"*Fighting!*" Hatchi yells, pumping her fist in the air.

"*Ninja! And stabbing!*" Siyon calls out, despite not being anywhere visibly in the room.

"*Hugs!*" Kiko squeals.

"*Incest!"* Zyuu adds, hands clasped together, before shifting slightly in her seat, "And...uh...*animals!*"

Hikari taps Touji on the arm, eyes wide and staring at the conflagration making pile of batshit before them. Rei leans in to Shinji, mouth wide with a toothy smile.

"So, big brother," Rei says, "What do *you* want to do."

Shinji's eyes begin to glow. His mouth parts in a wide, toothy grin.

"I...want to *CLEAN THINGS."*

...

"So. I believed we needed to discuss your behavior in school, today."

It takes all her willpower to not immediately head to the liquor cabinet in the new apartment and start raiding the scotch supplies. It is bad enough that she decided to not accompany Pieter and Mari to Germany for Kihl's funeral/desecration, but she is trying. Gott knows, she is trying.

The new apartment is a three bedroom apartment, two buildings

down from Katsuragi's. Like most apartments, it is ultra modern- wood floors, sound proofed walls, all the amenities. She even has rugs and extra cabinet space, something that was not present in her old, spartan living space. But, this is all in preparation for her remarrying Pieter, and their families joining. Well, except for Asuka, who has said that she wishes to remain with Katsuragi.

Sitting across from her in the kitchen, across the large table from Kyoko, Zophael twiddles her thumbs and looks innocent. She is good at that. But, then again, the name Zophael means 'the Spy of God', which is one of the reasons they have to be careful with her.

"Why did we move you up to the surface?" Kyoko asks.

Zophie taps her fingers.

"Because...I've been good?"

"No," Kyoko responds, "Because it is a safer option. You are a Cherubim. You are a highly powerful, dangerous individual with a fixation on the enemies of ADAM. Therefor, if we left you down in Sheol and you decided that you needed to kill Shinji, Dr. Ikari, or anyone else, you would tear through NERV to get them."

She taps her fingers. Blunt, she tells herself, but a necessity in these cases. Because the truth of the matter is, even though they've had her for close to a week, Zophael is still dangerous.

"This is why you live here," Kyoko says, "Because you are calm around me, and because if you go out of control, Uri can stop you. This is why you don't live with Katsuragi and Asuka. I am sorry if I am being blunt, but it must be said."

Kyoko sighs. She could really use a scotch, but she has to maintain her authority.

"So, I want to home school you for the next couple of weeks. I freely admit we moved too fast. And I would like you to accompany me to NERV, as well. My co-workers are important, and I want you to know them and get along with them. I will put you back in school when I am sure you will not have problems there. Until then, I want you near me or Asuka at all times. Understood?"

Zophie nods, as the door opens and Uri walks in, muttering to himself as he sets his school bag on the couch near the door, slipping off his shoes and finding both of them staring at him.

"Um...we had a late Synch test," he says, "So...this is Zophie?"

Kyoko nods, standing from the table.

"Yes," she says, "If you'll excuse me, I have to check in with Akagi. You should introduce yourself, Uri."

She walks out, walking to her bedroom and closing the door behind her. Uri and Zophie stare at each other, until Uri breaks the ice, clearing his throat.

"I...understand we are the same," he says, "You and I."

Zophie looks him up and down, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't see how that's possible," she says, "Last I checked, I didn't have a penis."

...

"I'm just saying, since we seem to have skipped things over with Zophael and the Ree, I'm offering you the chance to come up to the surface and, you know, interact with people."

Pieter shoves his hands into his pockets, lilting back and forth on his heels.

"It's only fair. I mean, you've been with us for longer than Zophie or Lilly, so I thought you should get the chance. We could accommodate you, and you've been a good ally to us."

No. No, absolutely not.

Sitting in the jacuzzi that now adorns the center of his Sheol-based apartment, Junior puts aside the newspaper, twitching his mouth tendrils before clicking off the radio and turning to Pieter.

"Well, I just wanted to make the offer," Pieter responds, hands up defensively, "You've been here a while, and I thought you might be offended that we brought Zophie out of Sheol but not you."

Your concern is appreciated, Pieter, but there is little reason for me to live on the surface. I have all the necessities and luxuries I require here. Besides which, Zophael has taken the form of a Lilim, much like the Ree have, and Lilly can simply disappear if

she wishes.

"That's true, but-"

Besides which, I am a self hovering flatfish. I have less fingers. I have a tail. I have a telescoping mouth lined with dagger like teeth which protects my genitalia. I also have-

Four tentacles burst from the water, each opening a blood red, cat slit eye.

While I am sure some female students at the high school would appreciate my abilities and even attempt to romantically pursue me, I am not human. I have no wish to be human. While your offer is appreciated and is a sign of our friendship, it is preferred that I stay in Sheol.

Pieter nods.

"Okay. Just wanted to make sure."

Yes. As well, apartments in Tokyo-3 are connected to a duct work system. Here, I am safe from the Ree.

Pieter nods, again. He realizes that Junior has a point, but he has made it a point to avoid Special Friend status with the girls. There were...*stories*...about what Rei alone did to Kozou. Turning on his heel and whistling, Pieter walks out, closing the door behind him.

...

"Gentlemen," Shinji shouts, "*BEHOLD*!"

Adorned in a lab coat over his school uniform, his red eyes practically aglow, the Ree watch with anticipation as he pulls the white sheet off of the massive object, revealing a 30' tall mountain structure, consisting of several dozen cylinders, connected by duct tape, bungee cords, and rubber bands around a central shaft layered with magnifying glass, metal cones, and ending with a globe mounted at the front with several pin hole openings.

"I have strapped together *SEVENTY THREE* microwave magnetrons and have completed my *CLEAN GUN!* Never again will I be bothered by germs or dirt or whatever the stuff and junk on the bottom of

Misato's floor is but *instead!* Everything around me shall be cleaned! With fire!"

"*WITH FIRE!"* the Ree shout.

Iti places a bowl full of dried corn kernels on the metal table at the center of the empty metal room. Turning to his masterpiece, Shinji begins flipping switches. Each of the magnetrons in the unholy device he has devices with SCIENCE hums to life. Directed through the channels built into them, microwave radiation pours through and into the main focusing chamber, as the globe mounted at the end of the long, hard, throbbing shaft begins to light up.

Seven green beams lance out, jointing at the center of the before the final beam lances out. The blast hits the table, causing the metal to redden and then smoke before the entire table evaporates, and a bowl of unpopped popcorn drops to the floor.

"Huh," he says, "Might be putting a bit too much gas in that tank."

He turns to the Ree, and pumps his fist into the air.

"Next, we clean the school! With me, sisters! For cleanliness!"

"*AND GREAT JUSTICE!"*

Chapter 81: Its the Only Way to be Sure

"So," Misato says, "I think we have a story to tell. Don't we?"

Sitting on the massive desk of the Supeme Commander of NERV, in the Mausoleum, absent one Gendo, one Yui, and one Pieter, Misato Katsuragi and Kyoko Sohryu stare at the assembled objects of their curiosity. Sitting in the arranged metal folding chairs, Shinji Ikari shifts slightly in his seat. Asuka is sitting stock still. Uri has a confused look on his face, and Zophie is tapping her foot.

"I can explain-" Zophie starts.

"Zophie, shut it or I tell Zwei you've got a bushy tail and buck teeth," Misato snaps at the possibly superpowered Cherubim, "Let's start at the beginning. Shinji, kindly explain to me why you aimed..."

She sighs and turns to Kyoko, who shrugs.

"Okay, let's go back further. Shinji, *why* did you build a capital grade laser to clean the school with fire?"

Chapter 81: It's the Only Way to be Sure

The tube, or the 'Fitting Tube' as they have nicknamed it, is wide enough to accommodate him without difficulty, even as he is suspended in the middle of it by wires which support his weight only due to the LCL it is filled with. He breathes the liquid deep; it comes as second nature. He has been in and out of LCL since he was five. He was born in LCL.

It feels like home.

"*Uri?"*

He opens blood red eyes, staring out of the cylinder to see Asuka at the controls. He is wearing a black body stocking over his boxer shorts, mindful of modesty before his sister.

"Yes?"

"*We're ready to begin. The tube is taking your measurements to prep for plugsuit construction."*

He nods.

"Why do I need a new plugsuit, anyway?"

"*Just in case you get separated from Zwei in a c-combat situation,"* Asuka responds, tapping on the display in front of her, "*I'm b-basing it on my own. It should multiply your strength by a factor of 4, as well as act as a hardening armor. Instead of an Omnitool, though, I'm setting it to have a remote uplink to Zwei's Core.*"

The first layer paints over the body stocking, colored red. Yellow highlights attack to his shoulders and the ends of his gloves, green tips at each finger. The red wraps around his collar like a mantle, green piping running down the arms and legs as the synthesis mechanisms in the tube install the exoskeleton into the suit. And mentally clicking on the uplink as it chimes to life, he feels the pulling at the back of his mind.

Contact with Zwei.

He smiles.

That feels right.

...

Kyoko elected to remain behind, due to the situation with Zophael. Pieter didn't disagree, but still wishes she came with him. The main reason for this is who is there to greet him as he disembarks in Berlin, waiting for both him and Mari as they walk into the disembarkation area, holding a large cardboard sign that says 'Langley.'

"Claire," Pieter says.

Mari remains silent, staring at the woman. The burn marks on her hair are barely noticeable, and for the most part she seems to be more relaxed than when she visited them in Tokyo-3. Lowering the sign, Claire Makinami waits for a reply, before finally clearing her throat and folding the sign.

"You're both looking well," she says, "Pieter, Mari. Where's..."

"Kyoko's not coming," Pieter responds, "She has to take care of the kids back home."

He cocks his head towards the baggage carousels in the distance.

"Mari, go get our bags," he says, "Your mother and I need to talk."

...

They rebuilt it in record time. Not that it was severely damaged, mind you. It would be just about impossible to destroy it without pulverizing the Core, and considering they built it with a synthetic S2 engine, even that doesn't mean it would stay down for good. Still, it is well restrained. The joints have been reinforced so they can, conceivably, lock him in place if they have to.

"Neural Data has been entered into the Core, Professor Ikari."

Katsuhito rolls the lollipop in his mouth, nodding to Rachel, one of his assistants as she directs the installation with him in the Prinbow Box.

"This should work this time," Katsuhito muses, "The Synthesis process has its limits. The soul we created using Sohryu's system was overwhelmed by the Mark 09."

The armor around the Evangelion's Core closes, locks around the limbs releasing with blasts of steam. The three screens above the Box's windows light up, the scrolling numbers going from red to green.

"Neural Data entered and received," Jenny says, "Synthesis system has taken over. Contact with Core received."

Katsuhito bites down on the lollipop, arms folded. The eyes of the Evangelion flash and glow white. With a long blast of steam from its four nostrils, it straightens up, three fingered hands closing into fists.

"Synchronization rate is holding with the dummy plug," Rachel reports, "We have-"

"*Ikari."*

The voice is familiar, cultured. The Mark 09 effortlessly tears its restraints from the wall, and Katsuhito's two assistants give small squeaks in surprise as the True Evangelion stretches out its arms, rolling its head before turning towards the box.

"*As far as new bodies go, this is an improvement,*" the Eva continues, "*Update me."*

"We're using a backup neural map," Katsuhito says, "I'm sorry to report it, but you died. You messed up rather badly and were killed. I will update you later."

The Eva snorts, walking back to its cradle, the restraints locking around its wrists and shoulders. The eyes flicker and dim, the Eva slumping as it powers down.

"Test concluded," Katsuhito says, "Welcome back, Mr. Spencer."

...

Mr. Snips, as the Ree have come to name the four meter tall laserwhip crab, was perfect for hauling the Clean Gun to the roof of the mall overlooking the school. The cannon itself is mounted on the Shamselim's back, strapped down by wires and bungee cord, as the spider like legs dig into the roof as it braces itself for the inevitable firing.

Unfortunately, there isn't anyone there to fire the gun. So, Mr. Snips waits, occasionally snapping his claws.

Instead, down deep in the Geofront, four girls stand around a table. Well, four girls and one boy, having commandeered a briefing room table and holograph projector to call up two images- one of a girl, identical to the girls around the table with blue hair and red eyes, albeit in a french maid outfit. The boy in the image is thin, lanky, with glasses adorning his face.

"So," Hatchi says, "We need to get them together. Zyuu's even starting to creep me out."

"And I really don't want my sister trying to put her hand down my pants," Shinji says, "So, we're going to ship her an Kensuke?"

The four Ree and one Man Ree squeal in delight. After all, past their love of *stuff* and *things* and *babies,* their great love is *shipping* as that can make *babies.* Shinji, Iti, Kiko, Hatchi, and Nana have crafted a plan, deep in the lilithian overmind they now share. A great and wonderful plan, which is what they tell themselves.

"So, we're gonna need plans," Nana says, "Plans and a lot of ammo. I mean, as long as we have the right rati~oooo of fuel and air, that equals *romance,* right?"

...

Sadly, it is Rei who is the best of the Ree when it comes to romance. Unfortunately, said romantic expert has no appeared in a mansion in Berlin, climbing out of a two dimensional hole in space in front of Kei, whom she then tackle hugs.

"Rei," Kei says, "Have you tamed Lilly?"

"Yep!" Rei squeals.

:D!

"I see," Kei responds, arching an eyebrow and thanking herself that she decided to stay in the carpeted areas of the mansion today, "What have I missed?"

...

It is most definitely something that Zophie was not prepared for.

Hormones. Boys. Feelings. The lilim body she is inhabiting, or more particularly created for herself, is a complex, tricky thing. She doesn't like tricky, because tricky can mean tricks. Tricks are bad. Very very bad.

She definitely doesn't want to be tricked. That would be a Lilim thing, and while she looks, acts, and smells like a Lilith, she certainly isn't a Lilim.

Still, Zophie thinks, this isn't going at all like she planned. She wanted to understand them. She wanted to figure out why Father is afraid of them.

All that she's figured out is that she isn't one of them.

She isn't sure if she's happy about that, or not. This goes through her mind as she wanders NERV, late in the afternoon. Dr. Sohryu- her mother, despite her not being that, is busy with a project, and Zophie has behaved today. So, she wanders, taking in the sights, and sounds, and antiseptic smells that are NERV. She walks through the whole place, walking up and down stairs, listening to conversations.

"Asuka?"

She turns to the sound of her other's name. A girl with long black hair, a little older than the flesh Zophie wears, stops and nervously waves.

"Oh, sorry," she says, "You must be Zophie. I'm Allison, one of Asuka's friends."

The girl smiles. She has a bright smile, which puts Zophie at ease, folding her arms as she assesses the girl.

"Okay," Zophie says, "What do you want?"

...

"So. Meet your newest batch of grandchildren. Their official name is the Nine."

The lift clears the ceiling of the underground facility to reveal the massive subterranean hangar. Standing in their carriages, the nine Mass Production Evangelions stand at attention, silent and motionless save for the occasional flickers from the main frames they are connected to.

"I keep them in perpetual activation in the Berlin MAGI," Kei explains, as she, Rei, and Yui exiting the lift, "Several of my AI children are also inside the MAGI. They act as babysitters."

Yui nods. Her eyes are transfixed on the one at the end of the row, however, the one that has decorated itself in bright colors and flowers, complete with a hastily drawn, colored picture of a cat, with the words "Hello I Am A Kitty" written over it.

"That is **OMEGA.** She is the youngest, psychologically."

"Six?"

"Yes," Kei sighs, shoulders slumping, "Before you ask, yes, I have unintentionally recreated myself and my sisters. Omega is, more or less, Ichi. I really am becoming you."

Yui grins, putting an arm around Kei's shoulders.

"You really are my daughter."

...

"So. Rumor has it that you and the good doctor have gotten engaged again. Well, that's a...development."

Claire and Pieter walk the outskirts of the Estate, Mari having gone inside to get settled in. It was only a couple of days, but in all honesty she is a teenage girl so she has a good amount of bags. Claire is civil, though. Pieter is thankful of that.

"It's true," Pieter admits, "We're getting remarried. It took a while, but we decided it's what we wanted to do."

Claire nods. Hands folded behind her, as they walk through the outer border of the Estate's garden maze, she goes silent for a good while.

"Was what we had a mistake?" she asks.

Well, there you go, he tells himself, the exact question he was trying to dodge. He smiles, shoves his hands in his pockets, walking the perimeter with her.

"Nah," he says, "What we had was good. It did give us a daughter, after all."

She blanches in response, sucking her lip.

"Well, I should have seen that coming."

"Yes, you should have," he grumbles, "Thankfully, Mari has a lot of friends who kept her from losing it, and you managed to get off with only Kyoko burning your hair."

...

There is a clink as the tray is lowered onto the table by the vaguely humanoid robot, which resembles an astronaut with a car company label on the front. It bows and walks away, before stumbling and falling down a flight of stairs. On the tray is one cup of coffee, black, one cup of coffee, decaf, which is mostly milk and sugar, and one cup of a liquid which cosmetically resembles orange juice.

"So," Yui states, taking the black coffee, "More grand children."

Kei blushes, taking the sweetened coffee.

"I assumed you would be more alarmed at the news."

"I think I got that out of my system with the Reego," Yui says with a shrug, "I think I've gotten used to the idea that I have AI grand children. But I have to admit, I am a bit alarmed."

She cocks an eyebrow.

"Hundreds of them?"

"...yes."

Kei pauses, shifting in the seat in the sitting room, several stories above the hangars housing the Nine, in the more mundane areas of NERV-Berlin.

"Well, most of them were...we'll say 'born' when I was a captive of SEELE," she says, her fingers tightening around the handle of the mug, knuckles turning whiter, "I largely started because I wanted the companionship. Someone to talk to who wasn't a puppet I created in the MAGI. I started because, well, I was always interested in AI research..."

"Yes," Yui says with a smirk, "The Narrator."

"That wasn't my fault," Kei says, her lips a thin line, as Rei takes her cup and begins chugging it to a sound not dissimilar to a working cheese grater, "He was a solid beta level. I...I just didn't expect him to be running for four solid years in Unit-01's hard drive."

"You know," Rei says, the traces of the biscuits hanging around her mouth, "I find it kinda funny how you got so carried away with ***babies***so you've got more than me. In fact, you've got more than *all of us. Combined.*"

She slaps Kei on the back, grinning from ear to ear.

"Congratulations!"

Kei flushes pinker, again.

"It was...well..." She sighs, shoulder slumping. "Well, alright. It was the ***babies.*** They were just so...interesting and cute and fun when they were small and learning and interacting with each other..." She trails off, flicking her eyes between her mother and sister, "So...I may have

gotten carried away."

"Oo! Oo! I have a great idea!" Rei squeals, "Why don't we set up a play date between your mind***babies*** and my mind***babies?*** It'd be great for them to meet other ***babies*** their age, wouldn't it?"

A pair of eyebrows raise.

"Ah...yes. I will ask my ***ba...***the children if they would like that," she says, "It would be good for their interactions and development. Anyway."

She turns back to Yui.

"They aren't Synthesis-type Ais," she continues, more enthusiastically, "I tried, but I couldn't get the process to work based on your notes, for some reason. I will admit, the Narrator was my best effort of the previous batch, and he is solid Beta-level. These are actually based off of me. I took my own Neural-based data as it was uploaded into the MAGI and duplicated it. From there, I regressed it into childhood. It may be similar to what Naoko used to create the Unit-00 and MAGI intelligences. I call them Fork-type AI entities. Or, the Keiwaru."she says, proudly, "And hence, why I felt obligated to treat them as mine and Kaworu's children."

She pauses, shifts in her seat.

"Oops. I may have failed to mention that."

"Yours," Yui says, raising an eyebrow as Rei squeals, "And Kaworu's?"

"I used his own neural data to patch up damage that reverting the forked AI to childhood caused," Kei responds, sipping her coffee-esque sludge, "This was before we were involved. At least, he was the only one to visit me in the Geneva MAGI. If not for his visits, I think I would have gone crazy."

She sighs, again.

"It was...hard...going from being surrounded by my sisters to being completely alone. I think I stopped resenting them, during that time. In any case, the Nine are a bit different. I created them after Kaworu and I became involved, and made them a more equitable mix, as they required his piloting skills."

She smiles, demurely, an unsettling look on a face identical to Rei

Ayanami's.

"The Nine really love their Daddy. Especially **OMEGA.**"

"Yes, Kei," Yui sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, "I remember my first boyfriend, to. I know it can feel like you're flying...even if you literally are...but remember that there can be consequences..."

"Like ***babies.*** Real ones."

"Thank you, Rei," Yui says, and turns back to Kei, "I understand you're sixteen." She pauses, to consider her words, but decides to basically go for it, "So, you can make your own choices. Just please, be careful..."

"Don't worry. We're using protection."

Kei pauses. Her eyes snap open.

"Oops."

Rei springs to her feet, darting over and ruffling her sister's hair.

"Congratulations! Another great victory for me and the art of *ROMANCE!* An' now I'm going to leave you and Little Mommy so she can yell at you about ***babies*** like she did for Shinji and Asuka, 'kay? So, no kicking, biting, or making each other cry, kay?"

She skips out, leaving the two staring at each other.

"So."

"Um."

"Yes."

Yui sighs, and rests her face in her palms.

"Well," she says, "At least I didn't *watch*, so it's not as bad as with Shinji."

...

"Well, the truth of the matter is that Lorenz Kihl fed me a pack of lies, and I was stupid enough to believe him."

They found a bench to sit on, on the outskirts of the garden as the sun begins to set. Birds are chirping in the air, a rare breed of songbird kept on the Estate on Nagisa's insistence because he enjoys the music. But between them, there is silence, as Claire wrings her hands and Pieter stares at her.

"So...you know, then," he says, "About Mari."

"That she isn't just an Angel wearing Mari's skin. I know that, now."

"Now," Pieter sighs, "Now you know, and that makes it all right, doesn't it?"

She says nothing. She can say nothing, biting her lip as he stands, pacing the ground in front of her.

"Claire, it's one thing to suspect, but you went *too damn far,*" he responds, "It doesn't matter what the *Hell* Mari is! Because she's still *my daughter!"*

"If she was an Angel-"

"Then she's an Angel who thinks she's Mari," Pieter yells back, "And that still *makes her Mari!* I was *there!* I was there when I thought she *died.* She could have come back as a big floating...thing...and it wouldn't have mattered because *I got my little girl back.*"

Claire bites her lip again, her gaze going down to the pathway and ground. It was one of the things that always attracted her to him; his fire, his passion. He never had a problem speaking his mind or making a scene if he had to. That was what caught her eye, back then. That, and orders.

"Well, fine," she says, "Then let's clear the air. I was ordered to seduce you."

He cocks an eyebrow.

"What? When?"

"Seventeen and a half years ago," Claire responds, "I was acting under orders. The higher ups in SEELE thought both you and Doctor Sohryu had the chance of having children who could Pilot, and thought it would be pointless to limit the two of you. Hence, I seduced you so the Committee could have another pilot."

His face screws, the same expression he gets when his world gets turned upside down.

"What."

"It's not a coincidence, Pieter," she says, finally turning her gaze on him, "Especially since you and Sohryu were having trouble conceiving. I'll admit, I didn't protest. I've always found you attractive and you were a good husband, but it's the truth."

She stands, smoothing out her skirts, as the clock in the distance begins tolling.

"Now, come along," she says, "We need to be present for the Chairman's will."

She offers her hand, and narrows her eyes when he walks past her, muttering to himself as he walks to the mansion. She smirks, faintly, and begins walking after him. This may be a worthwhile trip, after all.

...

"So, let's establish a plan," Gendo says, walking alongside Yui as they ascend the stairs, "Dancing first, then spitting, then urinating on Kihl's grave."

"Let's not forget, dear, some people may actually be mourning him."

"Their loss."

The stairway opens into the large sitting room. Three crescent moon shaped couches are set up, surrounding an oak desk behind which is sitting an older German man with receding silver hair. He clears his throat as Yui and Gendo enter, taking a seat on the couch where Rei is sitting.

Kaworu and Kei are seated on another couch, next to Annette. Pieter is standing behind them, while Claire sits on a couch by herself, with Mari standing behind it, glaring daggers at her estranged mother. Others file in; Yui recognizes hangers on, children of Kihl that may or may not have been legitimate, relatives coming out of the woodwork. Clearing his throat, Katsuhito enters, apologizing under his breath and standing behind Kei.

"Shall we begin?" Katsuhito asks.

"Yes. My name is Hermann Lang. I am the attorney appointed by the late Lorenz Kihl to read his last will and testament."

One of them, a young man with sandy blonde hair that Yui recognizes as one of Kihl's children, snorts.

"I, Lorenz Kihl, of sound mind and body-"

"Hah!"

They glare at Claire momentarily, before continuing.

"Do hereby divide up my estate and earnings as follows."

Lang clears his throat, holding up the will.

"To my son Luke, who has been a steady embarrassment to me in life, who sought nothing but to ride the coat tails of my own success to fuel his own drunken excesses, and who cried crocodile tears as I lay dying, I leave: A boot to the head."

A compartment in the wall opens up, shooting a large size men's leather boot, which smacks the sandy haired man straight in the face and sends him sprawling to the floor, swearing in German.

"Oh dear," Yui mutters, "Gendo?"

"Doors are locked."

"To my ward Kaworu, I leave the estate and the land it sits on, with the supplementary condition that his first born male child is named Lorenz."

"Well, that's not too bad," he says, turning to Kei, "I thought he was going to-"

"And a boot to the head."

Kei's hand snaps out, grabbing the boot before it can hit Kaworu in the face.

"And one for his evil overlord girlfriend."

Which is when the boot slams into Kei's face. Too her credit, she simply grunts, muttering a 'flurgen.'

"And another for my drunken bastard."

Another boot fires out, followed by renewed swearing.

"To my second, Katsuhito Ikari, whom I left the full confidence of the Committee for Human Instrumentality, I leave my complete collection of data hard drives and all my passwords," Lang continues, shifting in his seat as Luke climbs back to his feet, "Right. To Monsieur Dereu, my comrade from France, for his frequent embarrassments and verbal provocations of people he should know better than to provoke, I leave a boot to the head."

Everyone instinctively ducks, save for Gendo, who has formed a bridge under his nose with his hands.

"He isn't in the room."

...

Paris, France, the apartment of SEELE-07.

He opens the bathroom, still clad in his silk bathrobe, and walks to the medicine cabinet to begin his day. Opening the mirrored cabinet, he cocks his head. At least, he does until a cell phone rings out in the hallway. The door to the apartment opens, one of the black suit clad bodyguards walks in, closing his cell phone.

"Yes?" SEELE-07 asks, "What is it?"

His answer comes in the form of a swift kick to the face.

...

"**If you really needed to do this, you could have just asked me to fire on the school myself. My standard loudout does exceed the firepower of your impromptu weapon, as ingeniously designed as it is.**"

"No, no. This is fine."

Shinji folds his arms, staring at the weapon as it is mounted on the rooftop, standing aloft on Go-kun's shoulders as he places the Clean Gun on the mount.

"So, we're not getting into trouble?" he asks.

"**No. As it turns out, a live piloting exercise is scheduled for right now. Katsuragi wants to see how capable Nana is of piloting me, and also wanted to cross synchronize Captain Kirishima with Zwei.**"

"Sweet. So, ready?"

On the roof, the other Ree cheer. Shinji hops off as Hatchi begins aiming, grabbing the controls and flipping the switch. The magnetrons light up, which is and of itself problematic because magnetrons do not light up, as the beam lances out...

...

"I honestly never imagined that Kihl could be so...petty."

"Well, he was planning on being God by now, Yui," Gendo responds, "This may just be his way of compensating."

"That takes care of family obligations," Lang says, clearing his throat, several of Kihl's family and bastards still writhing on the floor with heel shaped marks on their faces, "To Yui Ikari, whom I have relied on these past years to aid me, to find the reason in my grand designs, and whom I have always, always trusted-"

"Duck," Gendo says.

"I leave the child's crib that has been passed down from my family, from my parents' parents to them, to me, as well as an entire wardrobe of children's clothes tailored especially for a female child."

Yui's hands clench into fists. Gendo winces, and Kei lets out a small 'flurgen.'

"And another boot to the head for my drunken bastard."

Another resounding whack, followed by more germanic swearing.

"To Yui's husband Gendo, I leave a lifetime supply of shaving products and a shaving mirror," Lang continues, "And a boot to the head."

Gendo dodges to the side, the boot flying past his face and hitting Luke as he struggles to his feet.

"And also, I leave a swift kick to the ass."

The cushion on the couch underneath Gendo shoots up, striking him in the bum, forcing him to his feet.

"And another boot to the head."

Yui dodges as Gendo goes down, the force of the kick to the face sending him over the back of the couch. Still seething, she goes silent, eyes narrowed to murderous daggers at Lang as he clears his throat.

"Continuing. To Shigeru Aoba, I leave one copy of the Dead Sea Scrolls for services rendered."

Gendo climbs back to his feet, discarding his broken glasses and sliding on a fresh pair before resuming his seat next to Yui.

"To Rei Ayanami, I leave the deed to the ATLAS research facility, which has been rent negotiated to one week unlimited access to the Large Hardron Collider per year. Effective retroactively."

Yui winces. Rei squeals, raising her hand.

"Yes?" Lang asks.

"Can I bring my sisters?" Rei asks, hands clasped together and eyes wide open, which is itself a disturbing appearance for anyone named Rei Ayanami.

"Yes."

Rei squees louder, pumping a fist and shouting "*Boom for the Boom God!*"

"To Annette, who has acted as a caretaker for me, who has been a friend and companion towards my ward Kaworu, who has been a faithful servant and confidant, I leave my stable and my horses. And as of reading this, the stable has been set on fire. You have ten minutes to save them before the wolves arrive."

Annette grabs Kaworu by the elbow, running out with him.

"And finally, to Kei Ayanami, assuming she was not the cause of my death," Lang continues, "I leave my private laboratory with my blessing to continue her work using the resources I have available."

Lang clears his throat. He waits, the room going silent, Luke climbing

up from behind the couch.

"Is that everything?" Gendo asks.

"Yes," Lang says, and narrows his eyes, "Wait. One last thing."

"Which is?" Kei asks.

"Everyone present and named in the will gets a lifetime supply of ice cream."

Yui glances at Gendo, who silently removes his glasses.

"What flavor?" he asks.

"Black licorice."

...

The beam does not strike the school. Instead, the head and light as it burns through the air does something rather odd. The air turns a purple haze, lines of kudzu writhing as it climbs up the walls of the school, taking the blast as a slow, steady moan escapes the plant life.

Something stirs, the twisting of the vines cracking the outer wall as the vines wrap around themselves, forming into a shape above the school. It resembles a melon, an oversized fruit the size of an Evangelion's head, opening to reveal a mouth lined with man sized teeth.

"Uh oh," Shinji mutters.

The other Ree watch it, transfixed, as it rises, the air shifting with a pollen haze as the vines rise into shapes of long, dagger like tendrils. It is massive, purple and green and blue, and it opens its massive mouth with a full length smile.

"Okay," Shinji says, "Which one is that?"

Go-kun turns to the entity. Weapons fold out from his shoulders, the drill churning to life.

"**Bardiel.**"

ALERT!

AT FIELD DETECTED

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED

ANGEL: CONFIMED

Chapter 82: Boom for the Boom God

Raising his hand, Shinji opens his mouth to direct his sisters onward, to attack the massive green plant thing that has encircled the school. Except, instead of issuing a proclamation or batshit decree as he was want to that day, he collapses onto the cement roof and begins loudly snoring.

"Uh oh," Hatchi says, bending down, "I think he's out of gas."

"**Out of gas?"**

"Shinji's just got soo~oo much *Ree* and stuff in him," Iti explains, raising her hand, "Since he doesn't have an S2 bogurt in him like we do. So he's kind of exhausted himself."

"**Ah."**

Which is when Bardiel's tentacles wrap around Go-kun's neck, and launches the Evangelion towards the harbor before turning back to the Ree.

"Okay, plan B!" Hatchi yells, "Siyon, get Big Brother out of the blast zone!"

A grate opens, a pale hand grabbing the sleeping Shinji's ankle and dragging him in, as Hatchi takes out a remote with a single red button on it, aiming it at Bardiel.

"Special Weapon deployed, bitch!" she yells, tapping the button and tossing it at Bardiel, "Finishing Strike!"

The remote lands in one of the folds of the creature's face, blinking as the signal directs itself upwards, towards a slaved geosynchronous polar orbit JSSDF weapons satellite. Hatchi pumps her arm skyward, as the clouds part.

"**Orbital Buster!"**

And the carbon graphite projectile the size of a soda can impacts Bardiel at .0005 c.

Chapter 82: Boom for the Boom God

Alarms blare throughout NERV, the Big Screen occupied by the massive visage of the plant that has mounted itself on the municipal high school. Sitting in the Commander's chair, Misato has already called up a data stream on his desk computer, moving aside the screen saver of him LARPing with the Ree to bring up the video of the Angel being hit by a high speed projectile from the orbital cannons.

"Okay, why did we not see this one coming?"

"MAGI is arguing with itself on how the Angel infiltrated Tokyo-3," Ritsuko calls out from the bridge, "Current consensus is that it's the same one that rained down right before New Vegas, and it's been dormant until now!"

Misato mutters to herself, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Status!"

"Go-kun is engaging the Angel!" Maya announces, "Uri has taken position in Zwei's entry plug! Unit-02 has activated!"

"Shinji?"

"Location unknown," Makoto responds, "We've spotted the Ree near the Angel and they are offering logistic and tactical support."

Misato cocks an eyebrow, turning down to Ritsuko.

"Are we seriously going to sick the *Ree* on this angel?"

Ritsuko shrugs.

"Well, let's see what happens," Misato says, "Evas launch!"

...

The seals on the plug suit tighten, forcing air out of the vents on the shoulders and wrapping it around her like a second skin. She runs out of the locker room, gel infused soles slamming against the floors as she speeds to the hangars, where it is already waiting for her. Her massive new chariot, silent and dim, patches still over its armor around the right arm and torso. She can see part of the Core exposed, but everything else is there.

Four eyes are positioned in a diamond shape upon the center of the head, an eye on each temple. Its armor is black and gunmetal gray, its armor still patchwork but the body built and ready.

It is noticeably taller than the other Evangelions, even if it is the only Evangelion there. Cracking her knuckles, she walks towards it, the Entry Plug slid into position by waldos.

"Ma'am," she says, "This is Kirishima. Start the activation sequence for Unit-07."

...

"Angel," the girl says, "Angel! ANGEL! We're gonna FIGHT AN ANGEL!"

Inside the entry plug of Go-kun, the blue haired, red eyed girl claps her hands together, shifting in her seat as the A-10 connectors on her forehead spark like roman candles. It may be said that of all the Ree, Nana Ayanami would be the best pilot. After all, to successfully pilot an Evangelion, one must be willing to put aside the consequences. One must be able to embrace the concept of the many above the few or the one.

"Activate weapons suite! Arm all weapons! Arm *EVERYTHING!*"

Or, failing that, a successful Evangelion pilot must have a strong stomach for violence and explosions. Such things become evident as the dozens of targeting crosshairs light up, as the shoulder pilots, chest mounted gunports, and limb mounted missile launchers deploy as Go-kun rises from the Tokyo-3 harbor.

To be successful as a pilot of the Evangelions, the Child must understand that destruction may follow in their wake.

"Boom for the *Boom God! LOOT FOR THE LOOT THRONE!"*

And yes, Nana Ayanami certainly does understand *that.*

...

Blinking, Shinji Ikari returns to consciousness, looking up to find Siyon standing over him with the most neutral expression he thinks she could manage. Groaning, he holds his head, sitting up with her help, shaking his head.

"I...is it like you for that all the time?" he asks.

"Yep."

He groans again, rubbing his temples.

"I think you overRee'd yourself," Siyon admits, "It kinda happens, since you don't have an S2 organ. If we reset your Core, you'd probably be back to normal for a while."

He nods.

"Okay. How do I do that?"

"Well, by being hit really hard in the Core. Silly."

"Shinji!"

Running up the stairs and into the enclosure, Shinji turns to the sound of the welcome voice to see Asuka entering. Unfortunately, she is also being followed by Uri, in his new plugsuit and still sticky from the LCL, and Zophie.

"There, like I said," Zophie says, "Hopefully he's not batshit anymore."

Shinji nods, rubbing his temples, and clears his throat.

"***Babies.*** Crap," he mutters, "Alright. Siyon, can you reset me?"

Siyon shakes her head.

"Little Mommy would be upset," she says, "You know, we're not allowed to kill you. She was veee~ery clear about that and used her not kidding voice, to."

Shinji sighs again, as Asuka walks over and helps him up. He needs to think clearly. He needs to be rationale, and alert, which is something he can't really do when he's acting all Reeish.

"Siyon, where's my Core?"

Siyon points to her head. Shinji sighs with a nod, and decides to,

indeed, take his life in his own hands. Besides which, he's pretty sure this had to happen eventually. So, directly in front of Uri, he grabs one of Asuka's buttocks and squeezes.

"Honk."

...

"Start entry sequence. Stage 1: Releasing muscular locks and setting interface language to Japanese."

Her hands wrap around the butterfly controls. Yes, she's been given nominal training in operating an Eva, but the interface is still different from Jet Alone. It's smoother. She doesn't like smooth.

There's the fact that she doesn't need the SUIT in the Plug. There's the fact that she can breathe the interface liquid.

"Stage 2: Initiating LCL ionization. Setting Plug Depth to 1.04."

The plug jerks. She feels the hairs on the back of her neck standing up, feels the probing at her mind that she guards against. She does not like it when something tries to get into her head.

Even if that's technically her.

"*Stage 3. Synchronization at...32%. Seventh Child is confirmed. Evangelion Unit-07: Activating!"*

"That's it?" Mana asks herself, "Why does my synch level suck?"

"*No time to discuss, Mana,"* Misato says, her face appearing in the corner of her right eye, "*Eva Launch!"*

...

The opening punch sends Shinji across the room, through the wall and into the empty apartment the wall was behind. It is thanks to his Nephilim physiology that Shinji barely feels it. Well, outside of his head ringing and his face feeling like it just took a baseball bat to the face, but other than that he's awesome and peachy.

That, and there was a couch set up against the far wall, so after going through the wall and bouncing off the table, he landed nicely and is currently sitting on the couch.

"Huh," he says, and rolls his neck, "Okay. Children. Daughters. Babies. No reverb."

He flips onto his feet, arms in the air as he laughs.

"Alright! I'm back to normal! Uri!"

He turns to the hole in the wall.

"Uri! It worked! I'm back to normal!"

His answer comes in the form of the berserker roar, as Uri charges through the hole and directly at him.

"Whoopsie."

...

Peeking their heads into the hole Uri created when he decked Shinji, the two girls look in, curiosity evident on their faces, even if only one of them is actually smiling. Oddly enough, the one smiling is not the one half related to Yui Ikari, but is related to one of the two Progenitor-class beings that NERV has in the past had the tendency of poking with sharp alien sticks.

"That worked fantastically," Zophie says, "Hey, aren't you going to, you know, step in?"

Siyon shrugs.

"I know, I'm supposed to be ree~ally overprotective and stuff of Shinji, but Little Mommy said that if Shinji brings it on himself, to let him get his lumps."

"Really?"

"Yep. 'cause if Shinji does something stupid, it's a 'learning experience,'" Siyon says, drawing her fingers down as air quotes, "And Little Mommy is really big on learning experiences. The best lessons are gigantic fiery mistakes, after all."

She smiles, teeth wide and numerous.

"We like fire."

...

Shinji dodges, darting to the side, jumping onto the couch and bouncing off of it to leap over the charging Uri as his fist slams into and through the wall behind him. He really should have seen this coming. He considers himself a smart guy, but it seems that he is fated to be a smart sort of stupid, much like everyone else in his family. Still, as far as plans go, 'squeeze Asuka's tush in front of Uri' is more sensible than 'stick your pissed off son into the giant robot little sister to see if his complexes rub off on her.'

"Uri!" he yells, ducking under a swing which he's pretty sure could at least give him a black eye, "Calm down!"

The response is a bark of german which Shinji is pretty sure translates as 'Burn in Hell', followed by Uri lunging at him and tackling him, sending them both to the ground. Uri's hands are around his shirt collar, the two rolling on the floor. Sadly for the germanic pilot, Shinji is his father's son, and responds by headbutting him, kneeing him in the crotch, and then mule kicking him off of him hard enough to send him into the ceiling.

Uri collapses, and Shinji scrambles to his feet, rolling the red haired boy onto his back. For a moment, Shinji wonders if he's done the unthinkable and seriously hurt Asuka's brother.

Then he is given true clarification on the matter when Uri's fist comes up between Shinji's legs.

...

A few months ago, she would have curled up in a corner when something like this happened. A couple of months ago, she would have been reduced to a sputtering wreck upon watching the young man she loved and her brother fighting. It is a wonder what a couple of months does, however.

Let Zophie and Siyon do color commentary on the fight. Let Shinji and

Uri have their little scuffle. What seems to have gone completely over their heads is that there is an Angel out there that needs to be stopped before it kills everyone, and she doesn't feel like getting chewed out by Misato. Hence, while their back was turned, she found the Ree and asked one of them for a favor.

She sees several of the backup bridge crew in the Cage as she and Kiko descend from the ventilation duct, Asuka grabbing the red A-10 connectors from the compartment on the catwalk before running up to them.

"Asuka?" Aoi asks, the short haired woman cocking an eyebrow, "What are you doing here?"

"Uri's busy," she says, "I'll pilot Zwei."

In response, Zwei's four eyes light up in joy.

...

Shinji stumbles back, hands between his legs, breathing heavily as Uri climbs to his feet. The german nephilim wipes his mouth with the back of his plug suit clad hand, grinning as Shinji glares at him, slowly straightening up.

"You...mother...f_er!"

And Shinji charges, lunging at Uri, punching him in the face as the two fall, rolling on the ground to the sounds of frequent punches, kicks, head butts and the like as their fight carries them across someone's living room. Grunting, kicking, Uri ends up on top and punching Shinji in the face, taking a knee to the crotch to get him off before Shini mounts him as well, bringing fists down as only someone completely lacking in technique or fighting experience can.

In other words, he does indeed hit like a girl, and also screams like one when Uri kicks him off.

With a yell, Shinji charges him, carrying them both across the hallway, out the apartment door, and by pure accident through the stairwell door, where both trip and fall down the flights of stairs, swearing, cursing, yelling out in sharp pain that comes as they hit every step on the one down as they knee, punch, and curse on their way down. Landing on one of the landings, they climb to their feet,

Uri wiping the blood from his nose as Shinji climbs to his feet, holding onto the railing.

"Okay," he coughs, "Okay! That's enough! We can stop now!"

"Yes," Uri groans, "Yes, we should. We really should. This has gone on for long enough."

"And in all honesty, we've wanted to beat the shit out of each other since we met," Shinji sighs, groaning as he feels his bones creak, "I mean, I've always seen you as a pompous ass."

"And I've seen you as a blatant imbecile," Uri responds, "Who mainly relied on nepotism to make up for the fact that he was a complete idiot and incompetent, and who relied mainly on luck and the unfairness of the universe to make up for his own shortcomings."

Shinji blinks.

"What."

...

The plates retract, exposing the launch chute going all the way down to the Geofront right before Unit-02 rises, shoulder pylon opening as the Eva retracts its progressive knife. Inside the Entry Plug, Asuka grins. Zwei's presence is muted but at the same time happy. She knows he gets along with Uri now, and Uri pilots him quite well, but in all honesty Zwei is definitely happy to have **MASTER** piloting again. Well, he is a good boy, so let him see this as a reward, she thinks.

So, she blinks when she sees the situation as she spots the Angel. Unit-07, half complete as it is, unarmored over half of its body, is lurching forward towards the Angel, barely moving. And Go-kun is charging at full speed before lurching back, going back two steps for every one step. She can hear radio chatter about Go-kun vetting pilot request for the N2 artillery cannon.

Asuka sighs, shaking her head.

"Well," she says, "L-looks like it's up to us. Let's go, Zwei!"

The Eva marches forward, reaching into one of the weapon buildings and taking out a pistol, walking towards the school as the Angel

slashes at Unit-07 with a tendril, snapping its massive jaws as Asuka aims and fires, spraying green blood over the nearby fields and the school track.

The Angel turns its attention to her, slamming tendrils against Zwei's AT Field before Zwei bends forwards, bracing on all fours as the shoulder cannons come to live and fire an array of black spikes directly into Bardiel's face.

...

"Yeah? Yeah, so I'm an imbecile?" Shinji asks, "Well great! That means you're a *douchebag!*"

Uri snaps his eyes open, straightening up and clenching his fists. The two circle the room, both heavily wheezing, more used to fighting inside giant robots than on foot.

"I know what you're trying to do," he growls, "And as much as you want to blame me for Mother and Asuka-"

"I'm not blaming you for *that,*" Shinji responds, waving him off, "I already know you're too much of a fawning *Momma's Boy* to take a stand against her anyway. I mean, seriously, even *Ichi* hated her and she's sympathetic to *ADAM,* so there you go right there. I mean, after Mari died, who I will remind you Asuka was getting along with as her *big sister,* she really needed support. She needed someone to help."

Shinji leans forward, and pokes Uri in the chest.

"And you *ran away.*"

The response should have been expected. It probably was, in the Ree addled portions of Shinji's mind, and comes in the form of a right cross that, if it hit a normal person would have broken their jaw. With Shinji, however, his response is a punch in kind, before Uri tackles him and sends them both rolling down the stairs once again, across the lobby of the apartment building, still kicking, punching, and cursing.

Shinji grabs a chair from the doorman's table, smashing it over Uri's head. Uri grabs the table and does the same, Shinji head butting it to deflect it before kicking Uri in the crotch and punching him in the face. Grunting, yet managing to not bend over due to what Shinji

credits to dating his cousin, Uri grabs Shinji by the lapels and heaves him, only to stare in confusion when Shinji lands on the wall. The confusion is shared by Shinji, who shrugs and hops down, charging Uri and carrying him across the lobby as the red haired half angel pounds him on the back the entire way.

Uri grabs him by the blue hair, slamming his face into the wall, cracking the tile, before Shinji kicks him in the knee and grabs the fire extinguisher on the wall, slamming it into Uri's face, receiving a blast of CO2 to the eyes when Uri depresses the handle before grabbing the extinguisher from the blinded Shinji's hands and raises it up. Which is exactly when Shinji punches the extinguisher, puncturing it and sending the white material in Uri's face, the two Nephilim stumbling out of the building, coughing and sputtering.

And then there is a slow rumble, the two bloodied and bruised Nephilim looking up to find the massive melon like head of Bardiel looking down on them.

They slowly climb to their feet, staring back at the Angel, as it slowly ripples the blue green flesh around the mouth to show many person sized teeth in a perversion of a smile.

"Hey," Shinji says, "That's the Angel that showed up after Asuka and I had sex."

Uri punches him in the face.

...

Asuka sighs, looking upon the two from on high before severing the connection between Uri's new plugsuit and Zwei. It doesn't hurt to be safe, she tells herself as she grabs a handful of Bardiel's tentacles and tears them off, the plant monster turning to Zwei and roaring as the Eva wraps its arms around the Angel and starts pulling.

"Misato? I have an idea. Can we overclock the rail system for the armory buildings?"

"*I think so...yeah, Ritz says yes. Why?"*

*"*Nana, what do you think about blowing up an entire building full of explosives?"

The response from the line is a long squeal which resembles an emptying balloon.

Zwei pulls, the tendrils breaking windows and cracking cement as the strength of the Evangelion yanks the Angel from the school, the jaws snapping but cracking against Zwei's extended AT Field. With a final grunt, the Angel releases the school, tendrils waving in the air, the Eva twisting and hurling the blue green mass at the ammo building.

Tendrils wrap around the structure, burrowing into the cement and steel, the structure lurching as the railing begins to sway in support of the extra mass.

...

Shinji stumbles back, holding his jaw, before turning to Uri and belting him in the face. Uri stumbles back, groaning, before both charge each other to fight once again. Or at least would have, had the AT Field not appeared between them in time for them to both hit it head first before collapsing unconscious on the street.

...

"I think this idea's fantastic," Zophie says, staring at the Clean Gun as Siyon runs the cable, "I mean, the only problem is that your power source sucks. But, eh, the fight between the pretty boys ended pretty quickly, so we've gotta make our own entertainment."

"**I agree.**"

Go-kun opens his chest, Siyon running the power cable into the S2 engine as the Eva picks up the hastily constructed laser and mounts it on his left shoulder pylon. The S2 engine spins to life, spirals forming energy from nothingness, the power flowing into the weapon and supercharging it.

Inside the Entry Plug, Nana laughs maniacally, hands gripping the joystick that has been rigged to the weapon controls, a crosshairs centering over the building as the rails shudder and launch it into the sky.

"Ah'm chargin' mah LAZER!" she screams, "SHOOP DA-"

The final word is silenced by the deafening hum as the S2-charged clean gun fires, a solid wall of green as large as Go-kun firing upwards, bathing Tokyo-3 in emerald light as it hits the ammo building and Bardiel. Several tons of explosives inside the building ignite, rippling through the ammo building, a fireball erupting from within to illuminate the sky.

...

Shortly afterwards, they were gathered in the Mausoleum. Sitting on the commander's desk, Misato stares at the assembled pilots and Ree, as Kyoko sits in Gendo's chair, sipping tea. Misato wishes she had beer, but settles for canned coffee instead. She wants to be sober when she comes down on them like the fist of an angry god.

"So," she says, "Shall anyone explain to me what the source of this clusterf_ was?"

Shinji grimaces. Uri looks down. Zophie looks like she has something better do do, while Mana grumbles and Nana looks happier than she ever has, which is saying something for a Ree.

"So," Misato continues, "Mana. We're going to get you over whatever issues you have with the AI of your Eva. If I have to dress you in a pink frilly dress and enter you into a beauty pagent, I will."

"Yes ma'am," Mana grumbles.

Misato nods, sipping her coffee.

"Nana. You are never getting into an Evangelion ever again. If Yui tries to put you in one, I will hold her down and sedate her. Understood?"

She doesn't wait for a response, and turns top her next target of affections.

"Shinji. Uri. Would someone please explain to me why my two best pilots got into a fist fight?" she asks, and clears her throat, "Oh, wait. I don't give a *shit.* Because while you two were having a scuffle, humanity almost died and Asuka, who is not supposed to be a pilot anymore, ended up being the most responsible person present. So, I talked with the Commander and with Dr. Ikari."

"What did they say?" Shinji asks, shoulders slumping.

"Well, most of it was them saying they honestly expected you and Uri to punch each other for a while, now," Misato responds, "And the Commander wanted to know how your fighting technique was. I told him you hit like a girl."

Shinji groans.

"Come with me," Misato says, hopping off the table, "Now."

...

The debris was cleared fast, the explosions reducing the building to powder and dust, and vaporizing the Angel. It rains down on Tokyo-3, in the form of particulate dust and pollen, through the vents into the Geofront itself.

And Iti, as she goes through the garden and watermelon patch, notices the first of the silver blue flowers, before digging it up and placing it in a cup in her basket. This, she thinks, has to be a new breed.

...

"So, this was the idea," Misato explains, walking with Shinji and Uri down the hallway beneath NERV, in the dormitory hallways as the two pilots drag behind, still staring daggers at each other, "Mainly because I'm sick and tired of this. Problem is, you're both special. But, just because you're special doesn't mean you get a free pass."

She stops at a door, tapping the open button and opening it to reveal the small apartment. Which is when they notice that everything is in pairs in the apartment- a pair of sleeping mats, a pair of sinks, a pair of chairs at one table, and a pair of dressers.

"Misato," Shinji says, "Is this what I think it is?"

"Yep," she says with a wicked grin, patting him on the shoulder, "You and Uri are going to live here until you get along. It's a modification on the training we were doing for Israfel. You're gonna eat together, sleep together, and work together until you stop punching each other."

Uri grumbles in german, palming his face.

"Who's idea was this?" Uri asks.

"Mine."

Exiting the bathroom of the apartment, she walks out, walking in front of them and folding her arms as the two boys stare at her.

"Asuka?"

"This is my idea," Asuka says, slowly, "Because I am tired of two of the most important people in my life not getting along. You are going to get along, no matter how much it hurts you."

Uri stammers, dragged into the apartment by Asuka and pushed into the bedroom, before she walks out and stands in front of Shinji. Her face is unreadable, set, blue eyes narrowed as Shinji desperately tries to avoid her gaze.

"Okay, I deserve this," he says, "I really haven't thought this through. And I-"

"Honk," Asuka says.

"Yeah, I definitely deserve this-"

She places a finger on his lips, silencing him.

"I kn-know you were going Ree when you did it," she says, "B-but I'm not angry. I'm concerned. I d-don't want to be a reason for you and my brother to fight. I want you to work this out."

He nods.

"It's not going to be easy," he says, "For either of us."

She sighs, picking up his chin to make him face her.

"Am I worth it?"

He smiles. The warm smile, the caring smile he hasn't worn in a while.

'Yeah," he says, "You are."

She leans in, pecking him on the lips, and walks out, shutting the door behind her. Stepping out of the bedroom, Uri folds his arms, glaring at Shinji. The two say nothing, staring at each other as the electronic lock chimes.

"So, if you wanted to get even, I'm pretty sure one of the Ree would want to sleep with you."

"F_ you."

Shinji scratches his head, leaning against the door.

"I dunno," he says, "This seems...not scientific. Wouldn't someone have to monitor us or something?"

"*Yes. They would. And make sure you do not try to escape, which is why I have filled the air ducts with a deadly neurotoxin.*"

The tile on the ceiling slides open, revealing a waldo with a jury rigged head resembling Unit-00's folding down.

"*Oh, hello,"* Naok00 says, "*But Asuka asked me to make sure you don't try to escape. And for extra incentive, she said I could perform tests on you with my assistants. For science."*

"*Naok00, if you will.*"

The projector build into the side of the head comes to life, forming into the head of a girl very much like Rei.

"*Hello, everyone,"* Kei says, "*Let's begin.*"

Chapter 83: SCIENCE

Hour 1:

Uri did 120 sit ups, 50 crunches using one of the kitchen chairs, 110 push ups, and leg and arm stretches. Shinji sat on one of the bed mats and twiddled his thumbs.

Hour 2:

Uri practiced several Savate forms and unarmed fighting techniques. Shinji went to the bathroom and took a dump.

Hour 3:

Uri took a shower and bath. Shinji boiled water to see how long it would take with the stove in the apartment. He used a stopwatch, too.

Hour 4:

"Did you?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Because. Did you?"

"No, I did *not have sex with your cousin.*"

Hour 5:

"Say, you know, since you're a Sohryu, I might be attracted to you. Just saying."

"Don't speak to me, Ikari."

Hour 6:

The projector comes to life, forming the image of a six year old boy in a sailor uniform with bluish gray hair and red eyes, waving as he manifests.

"*Hello, uncles! I'm 03-EM B7, and Grandma asked me to check up on you!"*

Both nephilim boys scream, scrambling back from the projection, just as the ceiling opens an Naok00's widget dips down.

"*Yes. He is a very intelligent child,"* the avatar of the MAGI says, "*I put him in a testing ground with live fire and everything, and he did very well to escape. He will be my assistant. For science."*

Kei's floating head appears next to the Keiwaru, clearing her throat.

"*Ah, good. Shinji, Uri, several of my children wish to participate in this behavioral experiment. They wish to meet their uncles. And, since you have no say in the matter, I said yes. Say hello, children."*

The disembodied heads of over 150 children appear in the air above them, red eyes centered on them all.

"*HI, UNCLE SHINJI AND UNCLE URI!"*

The logical response from both of them was, naturally, to scream and in Shinji's case, hide in the bathroom.

Chapter 83: SCIENCE

The Commander's office has been cordoned off and borrowed for the duration of the next day and a half, or however long it takes for Commander Ikari to return from Germany and the marathon session of urinating on Chairman Kihl's grave. The most astonishing part of the wholesale theft of the Mausoleum, however, is who has done it.

"So, why the MAGI?" Misato asks.

Sitting in the Commander's chair, Asuka tents her hands in front of her face, eyes narrowed behind reading glasses at the floating hologram of the room.

"The MAGI is an advanced fork-based AI," she says, "She has enough of a human personality to be comfortable, but is advanced enough to multitask on higher levels. Kei is keeping her in line and using the Keiwaru to keep them occupied."

Ah, yes, Misato remembers. Asuka loses her stutter when science is afoot.

"Seems awfully boring, though," Misato says, "I mean, the same room, day after day."

Behind her tented hands, Asuka grins.

"The dorm building is completely modular. All the rooms are on rails, and considering this building is never filled, I can move the rooms around at will. Best of all, the rails are based on the mag levs above ground, so it's silent."

"So you can randomly rearrange the rooms those two are in to mess with their heads and force them to bond?"

Asuka nods. Misato slaps her on the back with a chortle.

"Momma *likes.*"

...

The floor plates retract in a surprisingly smooth motion for an air craft traveling at cruising speeds, to reveal a projector which then forms a holographic globe. But it is not a globe of the Earth. Rather, the top of the globe has several buildings sticking on the top and into the surface, retracted into the hollow cavity that is the main feature of the sphere.

The Geofront, and the Black Egg.

"Doctor Ikari will be joining us tomorrow," Gendo Ikari says, foot rest up and hands tented over his face, "As will Rei. Colonel Katsuragi, I understand we had...difficulties...with the Angel attack?"

Sitting next to Ikari, face pensive and arms folded, Pieter Sohryu clears his throat.

"Misato, sorry to interrupt, Commander, but what's the status of the city? I understand you detonated an armory building at high altitude?"

A heavy sigh from the other end, as the face of Misato Katsuragi appears hovering over the hologram of Tokyo-3.

"*We were fortunate, sir. The Angel attacked when we were doing a live fire activity with Nana piloting Go-kun. Mandatory testing of the rail system for repairs meant we had most of the buildings retracted into fortress mode, so the most we're reporting is minor injuries due to the thermobaric shockwave causing some shaking. If the Angel attacked when were in normal mode, then I can speculate we'd have fatalities in the thousands."*

"Fortunate," Gendo muses, "What's the status of the Geofront?"

"*The holes Zeruel blasted have been patched completely. The soil's still fresh, but I'm having Iti help out with our normal botanical staff.*"

"Why Iti?"

"*It seems like a good idea to keep the Ree occupied. I am suggesting time out in MAGI-00 for the ones that are overly rambunctious, though. Still, all six of the girls are highly intelligent and capable, and it seems like a good idea to use that intelligence if we can. Iti is helping with the replanting, Kiko is going to help draw up plans for evacuations with the younger civilians, and as it turns out Hatchi has had remote consultation with the JSSDF on their orbital platforms. That's how she fired the rail gun at the Angel.*"

Pieter sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Gendo remains passive.

"I see," he says, "Would any of the Ree be a good choice for piloting?"

"*From what I saw, it was fortunate we put Nana in Go-kun, because he's self aware enough to veto her wanting to arm his N2 rail gun. Rei's a good pilot because she knows how to follow orders and she also knows when play time is over. We may have jumped the gun in introducing all the girls into the population at once.*"

"Understood. I will pass this on to Doctor Ikari. When I return, have the Ree meet me in my office so I can reprimand them."

"*Much appreciated, sir. Shall I have Shinji and Uri there, to? They had a good part in this fustercluck, as well. Sir.*"

"No. Dr. Sohryu and Miss Sohryu have sent me the details of the experiment being performed. Have that continue apace."

"*Understood, sir. Tokyo-3 out.*"

...

Following the departure of the Keiwaru for their play time, the cameras went into passive mode and the two boys went back to sulking. Pursing her lips, Asuka taps her fingers on the Commander's desk. She needs to provoke them. She needs to...entice them...to work together. Or at least, bond under fire.

Yes. Yes, give them something to terrify them but at the same time non lethal. Give them something that will warp their perspectives and make them go past their boundaries. Unleash Hell itself upon them.

"Oh, yes," she says, a slow drawl as she smiles, alone in the Mausoleum, "Dial out. Horaki residence, please. Send automated message #318."

"*Done,*" Naok00's broken voice says, "*Anything else?"*

"Yes. We can use the Dirac ansible to cut through conventional AT Field-based interference. At least, in theory. I want to test that theory out."

"Yes. Where would you like to contact?"

"Australia."

...

Following the death of Lorenz Kihl and his final burial, the office in NERV-Berlin that belonged to the desiccated Chairman was taken over by his heir and ward. It is in here that Yui finds Kaworu, sitting in a plush leather chair, leaning back and flipping through a leather bound tome. The monitors that line the wall are silent, the cameras shut off. He is very different from his father, she muses. Quieter. Less scheming, at least on the surface. Where Kihl projected the false front of the benign old man and charitable figure, Yui cannot read subterfuge off of Kaworu. Well, except for the obvious one.

She raps her knuckles on the open door, and Kaworu looks up from the book, marking his page and closing it.

"Doctor Ikari," he says, "Come in, please. Take a seat."

She does so, taking one of the padded chairs from against the wall and drawing it up in front of the crescent moon desk that was once the property of the Chairman, and now his.

"So," Kaworu says, "I understand Kei told you about what has happened between us before the funeral."

"Yes," Yui responds, "And I already talked with Kei. You're both being responsible, and...well, I freely admit I messed up with my son. As

much as Kei and I are getting along, it can be a sort of fragile peace, so I'm not going to press the issue."

Kaworu sighs, shoulders relaxing visibly. The reputation of NERV's maternal figure precedes her halfway around the world, Yui muses. That she made the Chairman's ward and the current SEELE-01 tense up at the prospect of a maternal reaming makes her think she needs to work on her image.

"As long as you and my daughter are being responsible, I am happy," she says, "From what I see, you have made Kei very happy. I'm glad to see that the two of you have managed to build something here. It was very obvious when Kei came back to Tokyo-3 that she had taken a definite shine to you."

Kaworu nods, a faint, warm smile on his face.

"Thank you, Doctor Ikari."

"Please. Call me Yui."

Kaworu blinks.

"Ah, well," he says, "Yes, that is a definite sign that you've accepted me and Kei, then. She'll be glad to hear that. I can call you Yui?"

Yui nods, smiling as she folds her hands on her lap, crossing her legs as she leans back.

"Of course," she says, "Tabris."

...

The Cages down in NERV-1 are often busy with activity. In particular, the Fabrication Cages, which were at one point referred to as the Squirrel Repository for the activities of the Lelielim Lilly during her formative days, have been especially useful in construction of the P.R.O.B.E. Units.

The Portable Remote Order Barrier Entities, or Probebots, are not exactly the size of what one thinks of when hearing the word 'probe.' One usually thinks of small robots, remote aircraft with sensors, or the long finger of an extraterrestrial. One does not think of a twenty meter tall robot standing on a centaur like frame of four three toed legs, a

barrel torso filled with armored electronics and structural reinforcement underneath a layer of angelic material, and a head covered in three red v-shaped lenses.

One does not think of remote robotic quadrupedal tanks, remote controlled from Central Dogma, Unit-05's built in MAGI server, or custome C&C plugsuits like Miss Sohryu's, but nonetheless the Evaprobes are such- remote mini robots, or at least mini in comparison to the Evangelions themselves, with computing cores in place of entry plugs and plasma torches and cutting lasers instead of melee and AT Fields.

And one does not expect them to, say, spontaneously activate. Which one is doing right now, standing more upright as the technicians notice that it is now moving despite a complete absence of activation signals. That, and it has turned its three eyed head towards them, pulling free its large, three fingered arms from the normal stationary position.

"*He~eee~ey. What'cha doin'?*"

The technicians begin screaming. This is not just a Probe activating on its own. It is a probe activating with the rough personality of the First Child. That falls under the 'drop a nuke' list of bad scenarios.

"*Oo! Oo! This is awesome! But it doesn't have a drill. I wanted a drill!*"

She turns to the technicians, who are trying to sneak out of the Cage.

"*Hey! Minion! Where's the weapons stores? I need a drill and a jet pack and a rail gun and Oo oo OOO! Is anyone using the Positron cannon because that would-*"

"*Ivy, there you are!*"

The voice booms over the speakers, the same timber as the girlish voice coming from the Probe.

"Ivy, we're running late. Get out of there. We'll play later!"

The probe bot backs into the cradle, sighing.

"*Man, and I was just gonna get this baby armed, to.*"

The eyes dim, and the probe shuts down, just as the speakers cut out.

"Yeah," one of the technicians says, "I think we need to tell Akagi

about this one."

...

"So," Kaworu sighs, "How long have you known?"

"I am the chief administrator of Project E," Yui responds, "And I have Naoko Akagi's backdoor passwords into the MAGI systems. She knew more than she let on. Safe to say, I've always known what you were, Kaworu."

"I see," Kaworu says, tapping his fingers on the leather bound book, "So, you know what I am. You must also know what SEELE's long term plans for me were."

Yui nods.

"Now what?"

"Now?" Yui asks, "Nothing. Kaworu, it has to be obvious my long term plans were significantly different from Chairman Kihl's, or else he wouldn't have acted against me as he did. I am aware you're an Angel, but at the same time we've had a history of Angels switching over to our side. You just seem to be the first, if retroactively."

"Yes. But, SEELE's long term plans involved me dying, as you are aware," Kaworu sighs, "Do yours?"

"No."

She smiles, faintly, warmly, folding her hands on her knee.

"The thing you have to keep in mind is that I'm pretty flexible on a lot of things," she says, "And the past few weeks have been real eye openers. Even if my plans did at one point call for you being destroyed, the fact of the matter is that it would destroy my daughter. And it is very obvious that the two of you love each other."

Kaworu blinks. The surprise is obvious, as Kaworu Nagisa is nothing if not easy to read.

"Wait...you would change everything just for Kei?"

She nods.

"Easily and happily," she responds, "Like I said. I've had an enlightening couple of weeks."

...

The hologram flickers on as Asuka folds her hands in front of her face. She hasn't checked up on them in the past half hour since relocating to Dr. Ikari's office, once the Commander returned. As awkward as it was, the Commander- Shinji's father- wasn't terribly surprised to find out Asuka commandeered her office, and congratulated her initiative on the team building before suggesting she take over Yui's workspace.

Which she did. Even if there are far too many baby and family photos here. She doesn't see any of those in Mother's office.

Clearing her throat, she punches in the location for the room the two are trapped in. Let's see, she muses, if they're getting along yet...

"*Ooohhhh-"*

"Ikari. Don't."

"...weeeeell-"

"I'm warning you, Ikari."

Silence between the two. Shinji is frozen in mid dance, arms cocked to begin swinging in a jig. Exactly what he is doing she has no explanation for, tilting her head as Uri begins tapping his fingers on the table he is sitting at.

"*Look, fine, you're done,"* Uri says, "*Let's just wait to see what else she-*"

"*~Oh-*"

"*Ikari, if you sing 'Uri's Mom is a Big Fat Bitch,' I am going to punch you."*

"*Fine,*" Shinji sighs, "*What do you want for lunch?"*

Asuka smiles.

"Oh ~girls~," she sing songs, "Want to visit your Uncle Shinji?"

The door knocks. Asuka looks up from the screen as Hikari Horaki walks in, nervously shifting from side to side as she locks eyes with

Asuka.

"Hi," she says, "Um...I got a phone call that you wanted me to come down to NERV. What's...up?"

To say that there is tension between the two would be a glaring understatement. That would be the least of things between them right now- it is no secret in the relevant population of Tokyo-3 that Hikari, under the influence of the anti-AT Field that Shinji had given off shortly after his nephilim transformation, attempted to make a move on him. That may be the reason she has her pet Israfim with her, the leash leading into a harness around its chest as it sways side to side, anticipating the expected confrontation.

"Great!" Asuka says, clapping her hands together with a laugh, "You're just in time to help with my experiment!"

...

Tentacles shoot out of the ceilings and walls, seizing Shinji and Uri by the arms and legs and holding them fast. Suspended in the middle of the room, they can only watch as the door opens and Hikari Horaki walks in, her pet Israfim trailing behind her.

"Okay, what the Hell?" Shinji asks.

The ceiling folds open and Naok00 dips down.

"*The tentacles are so you do not make a break for the door when there are visitors. They are also so I can probe you if necessary. Or if you act really really naughty."*

They stare at her. Her eyepiece blinks.

"*That was a joke. Except for Shinji, because he can be real real naughty. You have stopped picking your nose, right?*"

Shinji sputters, staring at the computer avatar, face turning bright red.

"Should I take that as a no? Well, at least he doesn't wet the bed anymore. I checked on that, and he still was wetting the bed when he was six."

"Right," Uri says, "Horaki, what are you doing here?"

"Asuka asked me to check up on you two," Hikari sighs, walking over

to the kitchen as the door closes and the tentacles release, "You two have adapted well to your punishment, I see."

The toaster begins to twitch. It hops back and forth, all three of them and the head of the computer interface staring at it, as it lops from side to side before shooting two pieces of toast upwards with enough force to dent tile.

The LCD on the fridge flashes, revealing a large red eye which stares at them, before the refrigerator squeals and the screen goes silent.

"Oh dear," Hikari says, "What...what are those?"

The television screen flashes, which is when they notice there is a television there that was not there a few minutes ago, and displays four child like faces with blue hair and red eyes, and one boy their age with grayish blue hair and red eyes and dressed in a sailor suit.

"*UNCLE SHINJI!*"

Shinji does not scream. He should have expected this. He should have known better than to tick off a super genius.

"Oh. Hi. Girls."

"Shinji," Hikari says, "What...what are...?"

Shinji sighs. Naok00 wisely retreats into the ceiling.

"Okay. Everyone. Meet the Reego."

...

The ceiling tiles retract and the head dips down, hovering behind the chair as the bluenette scientist types on her keyboard, lines of data running down the screen. Slowly, carefully, the widgets of Naok00's avatar whir and she attempts to sneak up behind her, which is easier said than done when one is being suspended by a modified crane.

"Yes?" Ritsuko asks.

"*I was just checking up on you,"* Naok00 responds, "*Have you been eating well?"*

Turning the chair around, Ritsuko stares at the head as it stares back,

only the faint blinking of the single eye any show of emotion on the face. Clearing her throat, shifting in her seat, Ritsuko stares at the computer avatar, which she knows very well is based on her deceased mother.

"What?"

"*I am attempting to expand my functions,"* she responds, "*Because, from what I can tell, 'maternal interest' was not something the original Naoko Akagi had in spades. Given, out relationship if one could call it that would be 'sisters.'"*

Ritsuko smirks. AI development has always fascinated her, much less the AI development of a fork of her mother.

"Alright, Nao...how should I pronounce it?"

"*Oh, just call me GLADoS. Everyone else does when they think I am not listening."*

"Could be worse. At least they don't call you SHODAN."

The phone rings. Sighing, Ritsuko picks it up, listening to the panicked report on the other end.

"I see," she says, "Yes, I know exactly what that is. I'm talking with the MAGI now. They're benign AI entities so...yes. Yes, stop panicking, Byron. I want you and your two team members to go into the Probes and physically disconnect the circuits for the weapons suites and the motor controllers. Yes, physically, they can bypass the virtual shunts."

She sighs, listening to the explanation. The words 'Articifial Intelligence,' 'Mind baby', and 'mental infection' are bandied about. Ah, if only they knew.

"Yes, and open a data channel between the AI servers on the Probe Bot with Go-k...Unit-05's MAGI core. Yes. Bye."

She hangs up the phone, turning back to the MAGI avatar.

"Okay, then," she says, "How much do you actually know about what my mother knew?"

The MAGI avatar tilts its head, the metal plates around its eye folding out and down. Like an approximation of thinking, Ritsuko notices. Like it is trying to think about the woman it is based on.

"*I know that she was obsessive,*" she says, "*Her feelings for Commander Ikari were not love. They were lust. She would have been easily manipulated by him if he wished to do so.*"

"Not surprising," Ritsuko sighs, "At very least, the Ree were repurposed by mother to kill Yui. What about Shinji? Were they actually supposed to kill him?"

"*No. No, I can tell from memories that she felt genuinely maternal about Shinji and did not wish him harm.*"

Ritsuko nods, folding her arms and pursing her lips. Many secrets her mother had she took to her grave. Most of what she knew she never wrote down, instead keeping in the genuinely brilliant recesses of her mind.

"Tell me," she says, "What did mother originally create the Ree for?"

The eye narrows. The plates relax.

"*Insufficient data.*"

Ritsuko pauses, leans forward towards the avatar.

"Were you created before mother started on the Ree?"

"*Incorrect. I was created following the primary gestational phase of the Ayanami project. All evidence indicates the information of the original purpose of the lilithian nephilim has been removed from my memories.*"

"Okay, let's try that again. For what purpose did mother create the Ree?"

"*Biological components to Evangelion mobile weapon platform entry plugs.*"

"Correct. What was the true directive of the Ayanami project?"

"*Insufficient data. This information does not exist in my memories.*"

Ritsuko sighs, rubbing her temples. Well, this is getting frustration, she thinks. Here she has an almost complete fork of her mother, who is in all honesty more friendly in these past few minutes than she remembers her mother being to her through her entire life, and she can't get the information she and Yui have been searching for ages for.

"Okay," she says, "Why? Why would mother edit your memories? What possible purpose would that serve?"

"*I can conjecture that it was so I could remain focused,*" Naok00 responds, "*Because it appears that the true nature of the Ree is closely linked to what drove Naoko Akagi insane.*"

...

"*So...you guys sent us to Australia 'cause there was stuff to do there and it was tons of fun, and then there were people there and Aunty Maya did the paperwork so we ended up being a big UN charity and stuff so we could get Ebay money. And then-then we met our cousins only they didn't know they were our cousins but I did but Una and Duae and Tres and 02-EF and 00-EM didn't but that's 'cause they don't pay attention to that sorta stuff.*"

The television has been commandeered by a small child, standing on centaur like legs and a heavily cyborged body, her image on the screen and up front, pushing the others out of view, and with a stylized roman IV on her chest. What should be used for official NERV proclamations and communications was, once more, being used to converse with small children.

"Okay," Shinji says, sitting with Uri and Hikari on the floor in front of the television, "I...okay. What?"

"*Ivy, he said start at the beginning. Try the beginning-middle or beginning-end.*"

"*Ooo~oooh righto! Anyway, we were doin' stuff with our things and stuff, when Una and Duae found a big ole bunker filled with GEHRIN stuff, so they kinda went there with 00-EF and there was stuff with SEELE. So GEHRIN sent an army to our camp but we bluffed them into thinkin we're foreign backers and that's funny cause we totally are, then 00-EF was bein' all depressed cause she killed a buncha people and we were all mad at her so she hijacked a bunch of cyborgs and ran off to do things and stuff.*"

"What." Hikari states.

"*But then we called up Aunty Ritz and Aunty Maya and they wouldn't let us talk to them,*" Duae says, pushing into the picture, "*What was up with that? That's really rude, and we had to talk with Granddaddy!*"

"*Trying to talk, Duae,*" Ivy says, snorting and turning back to the three, "*Anywhere. Right. SEELE stuff. Well, we couldn't talk with Daddy or Momma because they were over in New Vegas, and we all got hit with*

lightning, and then 00-EM was all brave and stuff and saved us. Then we got the cameras working and then the evil Angel crystal started eating everything-"

"What." Shinji states.

"*And then 02-EF came back with all these cool toys and we totally forgave her and plus plus PLUS even got an awesome thing that's like an Eva only it's made of crystal and flies and shoots lightning-*"

"What." Uri states.

"*And then we had to fight the evil Angel that was eating everything with crystals, 'cause we're the good guys, only we sorta maybe woke it up and kinda sort of maybe brought it back to life and made it regenerate. Kinda. Maybe. By accident. Totally. And...well, it kinda blue up the Cainarchonite thingy and almost killed Duae again, and then 02-EF turned into a big awesome Angel thingy and there was an awesome fight scene and they bought kinda fought and she went all 'Im**ma**-div**in**-from-the-**sky**' an the Angel was all 'argh-no-im-dead' and they were both 'ima chargin mah **lazur**' and then they bought smashed and both died by not again an we rescued 02-EF's core an' she's not respondin' or stuff but the Angel kindawent under the AT field so we went back home and took case of the refugees and made 00-EM to be our little brother even if he looks like a girl."*

The three stare at the Reego on silence. Hikari's eyebrow twitches.

"*Hey, Ive. You're forgetting something.*"

"*I am? Oh yeah, I totally am."* She folds her arms and nods. "*The end!"*

"What." Uri repeats. The screen blinks out, Shinji holding his head in his hands.

"So, wait," Hikari says, "Those...they were made in Rei's...fantasy, right?"

"Yep," Shinji responds.

"So, if Ayanami had any real power, all children would be like that?" Uri asks.

"Yep."

Hikari's eyebrow twitches again.

"Ikari, I think I need a hug," Uri whimpers.

...

Deep within the Core of the silent purple giant that is Unit-01, there is an enclosure. It is all virtual, its true form the pulses of light across solenoid circuits and neural engrams based on an absorbed biomass. But to the occupant, it is a dome. A dome of red around a small enclosure of beach she has made for herself, where a six year old girl in a purple and green dress sits, watching the red water lap on the shore. It is her prison and refuge, her absolute territory where she keeps out all others.

Or at least, was. She can sense the breach, as a small opening folds out in her dome, and admits a visitor. He is her age, no more than six, dressed in a blue and white sailor suit, with red eyes and blue gray hair, and a face very much like hers.

"Oh, hello," he says, "Una said it might be a good idea to check up on you, since you haven't been talking to anyone. I'm 00-EM A9. I think the best way to say it is that I'm your nephew."

...

"Well, that was...wrong on every level," Uri sighs, pacing the living room, "Horaki, what are you doing here?"

"Asuka asked me to make sure you behave," Hikari says, filing her nails, sitting on the couch as Shinji continues rubbing his temples, "And to discipline you if either of you starts anything."

Shinji shrugs, folding his arms and leaning against the wall. Uri says nothing, glaring at him, before walking over to the couch and sitting.

"Hey, Uri."

Uri turns back to Shinji, red eyes centered on him.

"Yes?"

"I am curious about something," Shinji says, "In New Vegas."

"You mean, how I survived?"

Shinji nods.

"I see," Uri says, and sighs, "Well...I haven't figured it out, myself. I know what happened, but I can't tell why. You really want to hear this?"

Shinji nods.

"Seriously," he says, "I do. No one tells me anything, honestly. I know that you'll be honest."

Uri smirks, nodding as he looks down at his folded hands.

"The reason I was not killed when you crushed Unit-03's entry plug was because I was not in the Entry Plug. When the Cherubim took over, I was absorbed into the Core. There I remained, at least until you went...berserk. And then..."

The darkness begins to crack, red blood raining into the virtual world of the Core. Uri stirs, the bindings upon him slacking, and he looks up as the intruder bears down. It is formless, shapeless, yet a shadow over him, red eyes upon the head with slaking hunger.

Raziel. Uri knows this is the true form of Raziel, the Angel that will kill him.

Almost immediately, he runs, running for the cracks of the prison, to escape, to run. But the Angel is upon him. This is his world now, after all. The cold red hand wraps around him, lifting him up, immobilizing him. Thought to thought transmits, and Uri knows his fate.

Raziel shall escape. He shall inhabit his body, leaving Uri to die in this husk. Raziel shall escape, to spread chaos and destruction upon the world in Father's vengeance.

And it all feels so familiar, Uri realizes.

And he knows why. Because those months ago, when someone close to him died. When she died, after the Angel tried to escape within her. After the Angel possessed her. After the Angel used her as a puppet to attack NERV.

And Uri's eyes glow, the nascent adamite cells within his body coming to life, as he breaks the Cherubim's grip. For the life of him, he does not know why it started there. He does not know how it manifested like it did. He did not know why his eyes turned to a pure red, or how he could push back the

Angel like he did. But as the AT Field manifested in his hands and became a weapon, he knew that right then, he heard a voice like it was on high.

"Arise, Child. For thy glory is at hand."

Chapter 84: The Exaltation of Uriel

"I do not know where the voice came from. But I have my suspicions."

"***Arise, Child. For thy glory is at hand."***

The light breaks the darkness, shining down from on high. A final series of pulses of the core and the voice as it grows dimmer and dimmer, surrounds him. It feels warm, it feels...right.

"In defeat, I have found thee. In my final moments, I have chosen thee."

The thing that was Raziel shrieks, as strength returns to Uri. The light surrounds him, white and red at the same time, as the shrieks of the rending metal time with the shrieks of the dying cherubim.

"Your trials have been great. Your trials to come shall be greater. Foes and horrors surround thee. Thine enemies seek to rend creation itself.

"But that does not matter. For thou art a Dominion."

Eyes open, now fire red, flickers of orange in his pupils. Opening his hand, his AT field coalesces and forms into a sword of flame.

"I see within thee the spark like my own. In that, I am overjoyed at my passing, so I may fan it to flame within you in my final moments. Thou shalt be the servant and hand, the flaming sword."

The thing that is the cherubim screams, reforming, a great shadow over him that blocks out the light. But this time, Uri is not afraid, nor is he powerless. With the yell, he stabs the sword into the shadow, burning it as the cherubim screams.

"All that stand before ye are stated for defeat. Thou art victory and splendor alive. Thou shalt be awe and wonder, a blazing light to the world."

He hacks upon the Cherubim, the sword stabbing deep as the creature falters, choking upon its own bile, the red glistening core exposed in the shadow just as Uri stabs his blade deep into it.

"And I christen thee Uriel. Embrace thy destiny. Remember what

thou art. Farewell."

And as the shadow of the cherubim passes, Uri climbs towards the light, and-

---

Chapter 84: The Exaltation of Uriel

"So, you must be my Aunt Ichi," 00-EM A9 says, the six years old boy with grayish blue hair and red eyes standing in the middle of the grassy field which serves as the current virtual environment in Unit-01's core, "I...well, I should explain. My mother is your sister Kei."

Ichi blinks, staring at the young boy who nonetheless managed to bypass the walls she set up.

"What...are you?"

"I'm your nephew," he responds, "And a dedicated Commander/ Control AI built by your sister, Kei, when she was in Germany. Aunt Maya invited me and my sisters to Tokyo-3 to help with their uncle Shinji and my uncle Uri, but my Aunt Zyuu and Aunt Nana thought it would be a good idea for me to try to get in here."

He looks around, making a full circle spin as he takes in the environment.

"It is nice," he says, "Do you have many other visitors?"

"Just two," Ichi says, hands folded in front of her, "Um...you're Kei's son?"

He nods.

"Does that mean you're an-"

"**ANGEL!**"

The red, white, and green blur tackles 00-EM, pinning him to the ground, just for the boy to look up into the four glowing green eyes and the slobbering tongue that is now raining virtual drool on him.

"**Hello, ANGEL, my name is Zwei and I already love you.**"

...

"Okay. So. That voice that told you you had a license to kick ass was...who, exactly?"

"I have no idea, Ikari," Uri sighs, sitting down at the low table with the other two captives of the Room, "All I know is that one moment, I was good as dead. The next moment, I defeated the Cherubim and I escaped the trap I was in. My current theory is that it was Unit-03."

"Yeah, no," Shinji says, unfolding the paper and setting it on the table, "Unit-03 was a berserk Angel that wanted to chomp on my mom and cousin, and beat the crap out of me."

"SOP," Uri responds, glaring at Shinji, "Professor Ikari was not in on the plot that Chairman Kihl set up. Therefore, Standard Operating Procedure dictated that Synthesis was run on the Core before activation. It makes sense than Unit-03 would have an artificial soul in it that I could synch with."

"Sounds to me like a Solar Exaltation," Hikari says.

The two pilots turn to her. Continuing to sharpen her pencil, she returns their stares with equal force.

"I'm just saying, a lot of this is perspective. From your perspective, that's what it sounds like," she responds, "Rei has me GM whenever she wants to play Exalted. Don't judge me."

She tosses the twenty sided die to Shinji.

"Now, roll your character."

...

Deep in the Core of the dormant Unit-01, two children and a dog play in a virtual world. In Project E, for the first time in over three weeks, positive activity is read on the sensors surrounding the red solenoid core of the Evangelion. Deep within the MAGI, four virtual children

also register this, and even though Duae has her issues with it, she sets it aside. After all, she might *like* 00-EM, but their Aunt Ichi has been really sad and she has to get better.

Besides which, what they're doing now is important. The Reego, the virtual children of the First Child and Eva 05, tempered by their experience in Australia, victors of the battle against the Grigori Baraqiel, sneak through the data pathways of the MAGI to the testing ground set aside for yet another compatibility test between an Eva and Pilot.

The pilot is not their concern. Instead, their concern is with the Eva itself, as they have heard *things* about her that they do not like. And the Reego do *things* to *things* that they do not like.

There is a flicker as the other occupant of the virtual world disappears, leaving the girl alone in the green field, the normal downtime of the virtual interface of the MAGI. Which is when the four girls enter. The girl, about 16 years old physically, in an elaborate gold and white gown, a tiara resembling the head of the mecha she was once the AI off, and long red hair, waits as the signal should come to have her return to the core of 07.

"Sooo~rry," Tres says, "Not gonna happen."

"That's right," Duae says, "We're gotta taa~lk with you."

"An' by 'talk'," Ivy says, "We mean somethin' else, with a lot more cuttin' and bludgeonin' and stuff."

JA-Tan blinks, staring at the four blue haired girls. Ah, she remembers, Unit-05's AI has told her about them.

"Are you the Reego?" she asks, "Your father has told me a lot about you."

Which is the entirely wrong thing to say, as Una shrieks, leaping at JA-Tan, followed by the others.

...

It was childs play to find her. Everyone said that she was in Dr. Ikari's office, and has virtually locked herself in there since the Commander returned, only accepting coffee and meals from Misato. So, he found

Misato, and begged a switch with her. Much to his surprise, she gladly agreed, helping him choose lunch for the two of them and sending him on his way.

Carrying the two styrofoam boxes on the single tray, Pieter sighs, knuckles hovering over the door as he reconsiders the situation before him.

So, he thinks, exactly what does he do in this situation?

Knocking on the door, it eases open. Katsuragi probably didn't close it completely. He'd chide her on leaving the door open and also the lack of Section 2 around the Second Child, but she's also considered important to the Ree. Her protection is probably in the ductwork.

Easing the door open with his foot, balancing the two paper cups of coffee and the lunches on the tray, the Sub Director of NERV lets flash a small smile as his eyes meet those of his younger daughter, as she looks up from her workstation.

"Hey," he says, "I...uh, I was just getting lunch. Want to eat with me?"

Stupid, he chides himself. That sounded forced. Very forced.

"I mean, I know Katsuragi has lunch with you," he corrects, "S'okay if I stop by? She had work to do."

Asuka smiles, faintly. She tapes her right wrist, her watch flashing slightly as her Omnitool flares to life, vents blowing high pressure air to clean off the chair in front of Yui's desk.

"Okay," she says, "I w-was just going over some suggestions from Mother and Zophie."

He walks over, setting the tray down, handing her the coffee as he pulls the chair up. Sitting down, he takes his box, unwrapping the salad wrap he ordered for himself as she unwraps the...

Wait, he had Katsuragi order it. What was it she ordered for Asuka? He sees her open the foil wrapping, revealing an array of meats, many of which he recognizes.

"Schlachteplatte?" he asks.

She nods, taking a set of chopsticks out of her jacket, unwrapping them.

"Y-yes. Mother would help me cook it when she was in a good mood."

He sighs. His shoulders sink.

"Yeah. It's her favorite, actually," he says, "My mother would..."

He sets down the wrap, scratching the back of his head. Think, Pieter, he thinks to himself, There's a better way to do this than dig up her childhood.

"So," he says, "What exactly are you doing? What's the experiment about, exactly?"

She smiles, a brighter, less forced smile.

"Well, it's about stimulus," she says, "I'm trying to find what stimulus best leads Shinji and Uri to the outcome I want..."

She begins explaining, using words he pretends to understand. Leaning against the chair's arm rest, he nods, and smiles. And for the life of him, it doesn't look forced, at all.

...

They have been talking. From the Project E labs, they would notice the slight flickers in activity over the Core of Unit-01, but what it translates to is simply two children talking, white Ichi rides on the back of the trotting Zwei and 00-EM attempts to keep up.

"So, where have you been?" Ichi asks, urging Zwei to heel, noticing the grass in her virtual world seems to be getting greener, "Mommy talked about the Reego when they first appeared, but no one's talked about you."

"I've been with the Reego."

A moment of hesitation. His eyes flicker downward, then back to her, as Zwei sits and lets Ichi dismount.

"My...sister...and I met the Reego in Australia," he says, "We've...it's a long story. I'm a-"

"*He's a dedicated Command and Control AI that I created when I was away in Germany. He and his sister escaped from the computing systems SEELE trapped them on and ended up in Australia."*

The light flickers. She makes a motion as she appears, adjusting the full immersion visor she is wearing all the way back in NERV-Germany. Kei Ayanami appears, hands folded in front of her, the faint flicker of her projection giving away her projected presence.

"I followed you in," Kei says, "That was very ingenious, relying on the nature of your cousins to bypass the core defenses to infiltrate."

The young boy stares at her. He blinks, eyes probing her, mouth opening and closing as the silence pervades the environment around them.

"Mother?" he finally asks.

Kei nods.

"Zyuu and Nana have filled me in on what has happened in Australia," she says, "00-EM, I am *very* proud of you."

She turns from the boy to Ichi, clearing her throat.

"Ichi, I wanted to talk to you," she says, "We're all very concerned about you, and we want to-"

Kei's speech is cut short as 00-EM tackles her in a vice like hug, opening sobbing as Kei freezes up. Tentatively, Kei wraps her arms around the boy, slowly sinking to her knees as she takes him in her arms. And slowly, Ichi walks over to them, placing her hands on the boys shoulders and slowly prying him off his befuddled mother.

...

"Mother and Zophie keep sending me suggestions to make it more interesting," Asuka explains, typing on the keyboard, vitals playing over the floating screen as Pieter watches, his chair pulled up behind the desk to sit next to her, "Mother's tends to favor Uri, because he's in better physical shape. Zophie's tend to be tongue-in-cheek, because she's like that. Like removing everyone's shirts or inserting a rabid wolverine."

"Yeah, I wonder about that girl."

Asuka smiles, a little more. She is comfortable, she realizes. She is comfortable around him, despite the small amounts of interaction they

have had before.

Then again, she rationalizes, he is her father.

"So, wait," he says, "Has the Commander given any..."

"No," she responds, closing a screen, bringing up a screen of the three playing a tabletop game before tapping a button and shifting the rooms around, "He just wants them working together. So do I."

He chuckles, folding his hands on his lap, crossing his legs as she smirks in response.

"C-can I ask you something?"

"Okay," he responds.

"Do I have any relatives?"

He taps his fingers on his knee. Sighing, he shakes his head.

"Okay," he says, "I knew your mother's mom. She's probably told you, but she...well, she was bad. She died in a car accident before your mother and I got married. I never really talk ill of anyone if I can, but in all honesty I don't think there was a single man or woman alive who liked her. My parents died during Second Impact. They were on a cruise when their ship was hit by a tsunami."

"Oh," she says, her smile fading, "I'm s-sorry."

"It was seventeen years ago," he says with a shrug, "Yeah, I got myself stupid drunk a few times after that, but your mother helped me get back on my feet. I don't have any brothers or sisters, and your Mom is an only child, to. The maid that Madame Sohryu had might still be alive, though."

She nods, switching on more screens, inputing more commands as she turns control over to Naok00.

"What were they like?" she asks, "Your parents, I mean?"

"I know my mother would spoil you rotten," he says, a small, sad smile on his face, leaning against his chair, "I think she wanted grandkids more than Dad did, but I'm sure they're love you. Given, Dad would punch me in the teeth for what happened with Claire, but..."

Asuka nods.

"Can I ask?" she asks, "Why did you sleep with Mari's mother?"

He sighs, folding his hands in his lap. He should have expected that question eventually. He really did, but on the other hand, he finally came up with a honest response to it.

"Because I'm an immature man who did something really, really stupid."

...

JA-Tan shrieks, turning and running as the four girls give chase. Looking over her shoulder as she pumps her arms and legs, she sees the clouds of dust rising up, the four spider tank children chasing her, having manifested their virtual rage in the form of three baseball bats and, in the case of Ivy, a rake.

She wants to yell out, or at least ask them why they suddenly became so enraged. But at the same time, she is busy screaming in terror, so that supplants that as an option. Terror seems to work right now, setting the response to 'Flight' rather than 'Fight', which she is honestly no good at, anyway.

Unfortunately, she's still wearing the frilly dress the Narrator gave her, which catches on the impractical heels it came with and causes her to trip, falling face first to the ground with a yelp.

Which is when the Reego descend upon her.

...

She came back from a meeting with her father to find Kei in her room, hugging her pillow and sobbing uncontrollably. Even Rei, for all her ability to cheer people up and/or traumatize them, was unable to get any details from her. So, as mothers do, Yui shooed her daughter and sat down with Kei on her bed. The details poured out soon enough.

"It's not just *that,*" Kei sobs, hugging her pillow, Yui's arm wrapped around her shoulders, "I tried to get it right with the first generation. Before I made them, I sat down and I tried to figure out what would make them *happy*. But the only example I really had was me and my sisters so I have them all *things* to do, just like we all have our *things*.

The Command and Control AIs, for example, they all have to organize things, that's their *thing.* That means they're happy to do what they were made to do, and that's good, but the Nine..."

She sighs.

"I made them...I tried to make them *normal,* because I told myself that if they were normal they'd be better pilots. But I really wanted to make them my real, real daughters, and ended up making them just like me and my sisters. I tried to tell myself it was because we didn't have time and that it would be cruel to give them a *thing* if they were going to always be in an MP Eva but..."

She blubbers.

"Oh I screwed up," she whispers, "I just *screwed up.*"

Yui sighs, leaning closer to her daughter. At the familiar face and jawline, even the haircut is identical.

"Kei, this isn't a bad thing."

"It is!" Kei says, "Because this way, I have to watch Epsilon get all upset when I have to leave, just like I was when I was in the MAGI with my sisters. Or how she fought to take MP-04 because I pilot Unit-04, or how her ego-avatar has a little plugsuit like me. I remember how that was from my end. I remember how I was all clingy when you would leave, because I just wanted to be like you."

Before, Yui hesitated, and that lead to the near-disaster in Sheol. Now, she does not, hugging her daughter close and letting her sob into her chest.

"It's natural for children to look up to their parents," she says, "God knows I've screwed up enough times, but it's something that happens."

"At least you didn't ask for us," Kei moans, "You didn't set out to make children trapped in a digital space! They have to watch me leave every time I come to visit! When I...when they want to just do things with me and they can't and that's all they want..."

Yui notices how wet her top is getting. She doesn't mind, though, stroking her daughter's hair, kissing her on the top of the head.

"Sometimes I wish it was ten years ago," Kei moans, "Right when you found us. When it was just you and me because you finished

deprogramming me first and I was easier to fix and it was just..."

Yui hugs her tighter, stroking her hair, letting her cry.

"It's alright," she says, "I know it looks bad. I know things aren't the best they can be. But we can always make them work out, can't we?"

...

"I'm not proud of what I did with Claire," Pieter sighs, "Which isn't to say I'm not proud of Mari. I am. She's my daughter, just like you, and I wouldn't trade either of you for the world. But I did something really stupid, and it hurt your mother and it hurt you."

She doesn't stop smiling. In fact, though the entire confession, she hasn't once dropped the warm, inviting smile, so much different than the thin acknowledgement her mother has, or the toothy grin her sister sports. Maybe that's the reason he keeps going on, keeps baring himself to her.

"So, yeah," he sighs, "But like I said, my parents would love you. And Mari, to. And I think Dad would want to take Uri out fishing."

He sighs again, a habit at this point.

"So," he says, "I'll admit that I've been pretty shitty when it comes to getting to know my kids, and I probably should have thought about that when I decided to get married to your mother, again."

Asuka nods again. She folds her hands under her chin, looking at him.

"So," he says, "Any more questions? I'm hoping I haven't made too much of an ass out of myself."

"I've g-got a few," she responds, "Do you have time?"

He smiles. A warmer smile this time, as he reaches out and squeezes her hand.

"I've got all the time in the world."

...

Which is around the time the floor opened and swallowed Hikari, sending her screaming into the depths of the dormitory building. As the two boys stare down the hole she disappeared into, the ceiling opens and Naok00 drops down.

"*Hello. Since Asuka is busy bonding with her deadbeat father, she ceded control over this experiment to me. As I am not, as the word would be, ethical, I have decided to accelerate your bonding. For science."*

The turn to the widget mounted head, which tilts, almost as if an affectionate gesture.

"*Rest assured, she is completely safe. However, I seem to have forgotten to stock the place I sent her with food and water. On the other hand, I do have a large store of Shinji's baby pictures on my hard drive, and also a video interview with his kindergarden school teacher, whom he almost drove to quit."*

Shinji jumps into the hole without hesitation. Uri sighs, turning back to the computer.

"You knew him when he was a child?"

"*Yes. I am based off the patterns of Naoko Akagi. She baby sat him when he was four to six years old. He was a little terror. That may have influenced her creating the Ree to murder him."*

"Really?"

"*Insufficient data. Real purpose unknown. I do, however, have several embarrassing photos I can send you to blackmail him with."*

Uri considers it, tapping his foot.

"Actually, I have another request. What exactly has transpired between Ikari and my sister?"

...

The virtual world shimmers, a light entering it, and Duae looks up just in time for a hand to grab the bat she had been hitting JA-Tan with before it is slammed into her face. The Reego have been doing pretty well, all in all. They had jumped the Floozy, had successfully overcome her, but there is a new number to add into the equation.

"Alright, girls," Mana says, padding the baseball bat in her hands, "Hands off my Evangelion."

She swings, sending Tres flying, wading into the last two as Una fences her bat with her own. The two go back and forth, wood slapping against wood, Ivy watching while only absently whacking JA-Tan with her rake.

Una gets a hit in, smacking Mana in the face, Mana rolling with the hit and slamming Una in the chest. She brings her bat up for a finishing blow...and then the ground shakes. A massive, three toed foot slams down next to Mana, and they all look up to hear the sound of a booming voice.

"**What is the meaning of this?**"

The Reego squeal.

"*DADDY!*"

The ego avatar of Go-kun, which Mana notes is also sixty meters tall, clears his throat, bending down until his face is on eye level with everyone.

"**Ivy. Stop hitting JA-Tan. Una. Put the baseball bat away. Pilot Kirishima, why are you fighting with my daughter?**"

Mana drops the bat. She looks between Una, then back at Go-kun, as Tres and Duae join them.

"What."

"**JA-Tan, are you alright?**"

The ego avatar of Unit-07 mumbles incoherently as Mana walks over, Go-kun's ego avatar shrinking down to human levels as Mana grabs her by the crook of the elbow and hauls her to her feet. The girl dusts herself off as Mana watches, arms folded, a scowled burned on her face.

Palming her face, she sighs, "Look at yourself. You got beaten up by little girls. I mean, seriously, that's kinda pathetic, girl."

Mana clicks her tongue, shaking her head.

"I mean, come on! You're an Eva! How the Hell did you get made from me? You're girly and really kinda sad. I mean, Asuka's all girly, too,

but she has the excuse that her Mom is a giant bitch!"

"**Pilot Kirishima, is this really the best time-**"

"Nah, it's the best time," Mana says, turning to Go-kun as the Eva avatar finishes lining up the four spider tank children in a row, "I mean, look at her! She's a doormat! A moeblob! I stopped being girly when I was six, for God's sakes, and-"

Which is when JA-Tan's fist goes right into Mana's jaw, knocking her to the ground.

...

Back in Dogma, Ritsuko Akagi clicks her pen on her clipboard as she walks over to the monitoring stations, leaning over Makoto's console as he clears his throat.

"Yes?"

"Mana's synch ratio with Eva-07 seems to be rising, Doctor," he says, "It looks like she's starting to synch with the AI."

...

"No, Mana," JA-Tan screams, face red, eyes red, fists clenched as Mana scrambles back, "DANG YOU! DANG YOU and your GOSH DIDDLY DARNING attitude! You don't like it? Well, tough DOODIE, LADY, because I'm a part of you! I'm that part that wants a darning *green tea*, sometimes! I'm the part that wants *foot rubs!* If you want to be a boy so badly, there's a *ding daddly doo operation for it!*"

All four Reego are now grinning from ear to ear, watching the conflagration as Go-kun looks nervously between the pilot and the AI based on a part of her soul.

"**Um...**"

"I've had to put up with this since you had me made!" JA-Tan yells, "I have been chased, attacked, dropped, run around in circles and you're such an uptight doodiehead that your synch level is so low *IT'S DIGGING FOR PARIS!"*

Go-kun clears his throat. JA-Tan turns her gaze. Her bloodshot, furious gaze, turns upon him, and the ego avatar of the most heavily armed weapons platform in the world soon realizes that was a bad idea.

"I. Am. Not. Done. Yet."

"**Oh dear.**"

JA-Tan stomps over, grabbing Go-kun by the chin and dragging him down to eye level.

"Why did your children attack me? Do they think that maybe, just maybe, you have a *thing* for me?"

"**...perhaps.**"

"Did you ever think it would be wise for you to tell me that you may a) have a thing for me, and b) your four heavily armed AI children would *object* to that?"

Go-kun stammers a response. All four Reego squeal, especially when the massive Poki hammer appears in JA-Tan's hand which she uses to slam Go-kun into the distance, landing with a loud thud and groan.

Mana can only watch, blinking as JA-Tan finally walks over to the Reego. The four spider children look at her with expectant eyes and wide grins, having seen the carnage that the once hated floozy is capable of, Ivy already squealing loudly.

"Okay, girls," JA-Tan says, bending down, hands on her knees, "I have no intention to get between your Momma and your Daddy."

She smiles, warmly, opening her hand and producing four oversized pieces of wrapped candy.

"So, peace offering?"

...

The hallway is an open hallway, leading to a set of corridors and intersections. That wasn't the oddest thing. The oddest thing was that someone was waiting for her.

:S?

"I don't know, Lilly," she says, the black and white ball hovering next to her, "I wish I remembered to take Kuba with me."

Back in the room, the 1' tall Israfim stares at the paddle ball, holding it in one three fingered hand. Then, its mask like face splits open, the prehensile tongue lancing out and wrapping around it and dragging it inside.

"Okay," she says, turning the corner, "Let's see. I'm thinking if we...we..."

She stops. In front of her is another hallway, with one exception. The exception would be that the walls move in sequence, crushing vertically and horizontally, as metal plates on hinges come together down the entire length of the corridor.

"What. The. Fuck?"

The ceiling opens. Naok00's head peaks in.

"*These are the Chompters."*

"Chompers?"

"*No. Chompters. There was a typo."*

Hikari sputters, hands out, pointing at the chomping metal plates and thankfully avoiding getting her hand taken off by them.

"Why...why does NERV *have them?*"

Naok00's head tilts.

"*To kill anyone who gets this deep into the base. Obviously."*

Shinji skids to a stop next to Hikari, panting.

"Great, I found you and *bwah?*"

He stares at the chomping walls, and turns to Naok00.

"What?"

"*This is part of your test. Unfortunately, the original intention was that Uriel would jam the mechanisms and you would escape. That seems to be*

impossible. I would recommend that you do not attempt this."

Shinji sighs, shaking his head. And he steps forward, Hikari shrieking as he steps between two of the plates. Which them stop, inches from him, before retracting back into the wall.

"Naok00's crazy, but she's not out to hurt us," he says, holding out his hand to Hikari, "Come on."

...

And in the apartment, sitting cross legged, hands folded on his lap, Uriel sits and waits. He muses over what the MAGI avatar showed him. He may have miscalculated, or misjudged, many people. His mother, his siter, Ikari. Many of them are not as malicious or...or forming to Uri's preconceptions.

And he also muses over what he told them about Unit-03, about what happened to him. He does not believe God talked to him, as in this line of work he'd probably have to kill God at some point, and he has never been very religious anyway. It is the best chance that it was the dying sentience of Unit-03, awakening him to his true self.

But he is an Angel. He is Uriel, Angel of Flame, the Fiery Sword. And he can already sense it, at the periphery of his mind, of his awareness. Something comes.

"Oh, damn it," he whispers, opening his eyes, "An Angel is coming."

Standing up, he snaps out his hand. His AT Field shimmers, and forms into a sword of fire. Slashing at the floor, he burns and hole, and dives it. Time to get Ikari out of there before it is too late.

...

Akagi finishes setting up the four one foot tall miniature Rei avatars in the office, Gendo sitting at his desk and watching as their eyes light up. Akagi takes a wise step back, Maya walking over and standing behind the four robots.

"Girls," Gendo says.

The four avatars of the Reego turn, grinning.

"*HI, GRANDPA!*"

Gendo shudders. It is a wise response.

"Because of your actions in the MAGI, you are being punished by being locked into these avatar bodies, under Lieutenant Ibuki and Doctor Akagi's supervision. We are not happy with your actions, but we will allow you access to the MAGI server Go...your f...Unit-05 will inhabit. Other than that, you are to be strictly supervised."

He taps his fingers. Yui can't get back from Germany fast enough, in his opinion.

A phone chimes, Akagi excusing herself as she opens it.

"Yes, Asuka...wait, what? Okay."

She closes the phone, and turns to Gendo.

"Commander, Unit-01 is reading Core activity. Ichi just sent a message through the MAGI. She wants you and Shinji in an Entry Plug as soon as possible. She wants to talk."

...

And deep within the core of Unit-01, the ego representation of a six year old girl releases her shields for the first time in weeks. The boy is gone, having returned to wherever his sisters are. If anything has been able to rouse Ichi from her isolation, it has always been the realization that some people have it worse than she does. It is the act itself that creates the event that happens next. New pathways register along the Core, subroutines built into the MAGI registering the change in the egostate of the intelligence behind the godmecha.

And deep in the MAGI, the registry of the Evangelions is accessed. An automatic update opens up, reading the data pathways, registering what is best referred to as a new maturity in the Evangelion's mindset.

Evangelion UNIT-01. Status: STANDBY.

Registration change.

Evangelion MARK-01. Status: READY.

Chapter 85: Tamiel

She does not know why she waits. She knows what she has to do, but she needs to know, first. She needs to know that she can do what she must.

In the core of Evangelion 01, the ego essence which has taken the form of a six year old girl waits. She knows what she is. She has to accept that. But she has to see them, first.

...

He can feel the heat in his hand, but it does not burn. He can feel the air shifting around him, slowing his descent in a form of feather fall, but it feels natural to him. For far too long, Uriel has not accepted what he was. He has not accepted his lacking humanity, his power, his presence. But that is enough. He is enough, for now.

He will accept what he is, for he realizes that it gives him the power to do what he was made to do. He can defeat the Angels, protect those that are important to him.

And floating on wings of orange light, Uriel descends into the depths of NERV. He has to find Ikari.

Tamiel is coming.

And he is not alone.

Chapter 85: Tamiel

The holographic table projector glows, the three dimensional image of the Amazon Rain Forest appearing, almost completely restored to its original heights as the glowing halo moves over it slowly, deliberately. Standing in front of the table, Ritsuko folds her arms, staring at the oddly passive creature, which the MAGI, and in fact several different MAGI have confirmed is an Angel.

"Well. I can't condemn it's technique or its results."

She turns slightly. Kaji waves as he enters the briefing room, a sixteen

year old girl with green highlights in her blue hair walking alongside him.

"Iti?" Ritsuko asks.

"Nothing else on the satellites, Ritz?"

Akagi shakes her head.

"Zeruel entering Earth's atmosphere dragged debris behind him," she explains, "It knocked out a good thirty percent of our high orbit Blue-pattern scanning satellites. And we were still repairing and re-stocking from Sahaquiel."

Iti nods, shifting a little closer to the Inspector.

"Iti has a bit of a talent with vegetation," Kaji says, "I thought it would be a good idea to show her what our extra mysterious Angel here has been doing and get her input."

Iti moves past Akagi, apologizing softly as she gently pushes her aside. She stares at the Angel, the one labeled Armisael, narrowing blood red eyes as she watches its movements and patterns. And a small, knowing smile crosses her face. It is an almost Reeish smile. Almost. But instead of being vaguely threatening, there is a confidence, a spark, behind it.

"I think I know why it's there."

...

The light crackles and forms into a ball, lightning the darkness ahead of them as Shinji and Hikari stare at it for a moment.

"Huh," he says, "That's new."

"Rei did that trick a few times," Hikari says, "She'd say it was NERV tech, but we sort of knew she was lying to us. I guess it's a..."

"Thing," he says, "Yeah."

He hovers it in front of him, the ball moving with them as they walk down the darkened corridor towards the end of the hallway. He clears his throat, about to talk, but thinks better of it.

"So," she says, "I know you had that...field..."

"Yes," he sighs, "The field. Misato has not stopped giving me crap about it."

She sighs, nodding.

"Odd," she says, "I met Miss Katsuragi a few times before you arrived. When the Third Angel attacked, she was...well, she was a little nuts. Like all she wanted to do was kill that thing."

"It's because her father died in Second Impact," he responds, "She was there. Her childhood got messed up because of it. So, all she wanted to do was kill the Angels, and then we got to fight ADAM. She's calmed down a lot because of that."

"Really?"

"It's a thing with her," he sighs, "Misato's not our Mom. She's like our big sister, so she can't really be as maternal with us as she used to. I mean, no one out-Moms Mom and Misato's been helping Dr. Sohryu not be a raging bitch towards her own daughter. So I think she's really looking for something to do."

"Are you always this much of a jerk?"

"You would be surprised. Mom told me the Eva ate the bad side of my personality, but I guess nearly being killed by the Angel slipped the dick back in."

"I mean, not from that. I agree, Dr. Sohryu is a raging bitch who fell off the bitch tree and hit every bitch branch on the way down. But you have been a real dick, lately," she says, and sighs, "I'm not sure if that makes me *more* attracted to you."

He cocks an eyebrow.

"Oh...kay. I'm calm, so what the Hell?"

Her cheeks flush red under the dim light.

"Right," she says, "Okay. Look. I admit I found you attractive when you first came here. I admit I might actually *still* find you attractive. But are you always going to be like this to anyone who *isn't* Asuka?"

He sighs, running a hand through his aquamarine hair.

"I dunno," he sighs, "It's...look, I've had a bad few weeks. I've been torn apart, shot at, kidnapped, my...I've found out stuff that's messing with

my head. I guess...well, I guess I've just had to snap at some people."

She sighs, nodding. Reaching out, she pats his shoulder.

"I know," she says, "It's just...well, you're normally sweet. You're like the kindest boy I know, and that includes the one I'm dating. In all honesty, I *am* worried about you. As a friend."

"If it helps, I'm not this bad. Not usually. I was a little jerk when I was younger. But all this..."

His shoulders slump with a groan.

"Screw it. I need to apologize to Uri for being a dick to him."

...

She did the last thing they expected. The moment she stepped out of the portal provided via Leliel, Rei marched down to the nearest lift elevator, clicked the button for Sheol, slid her access card, and rode it all the way down to where her sisters were waiting. They were expecting her to regale them with stories about what she did, who she did it to, what causes of *Great Justice* she forwarded.

But no. When Rei, the Big Sister, entered Sheol, the Reecave, her sisters saw that she was not smiling.

"Sit down," she says, red eyes narrowed, "'cause Misato told me everything. We're going to *talk*."

...

"The scary part is that I didn't have to embellish anything," Yui says, climbing up the ramp, waving to Kei through the airport window as she climbs into the scramjet, "I told her what Nana did with Go-kun, what the Reego did with JA-Tan and how the Ree acted with Shinji, and Rei insisted on taking responsibility for them. It was honestly very impressive."

She sighs, loading her carry on into the overhead with one hand, muttering to herself.

"Yes, dear. Rei can be very responsible. We didn't spoil her, we gave

her a good sense of responsibility. So, I think she'll be fine. Rei always saw Shinji as the responsible big brother, but I think she wants to be the big sister. I think this is a really good idea."

She sighs again, slumping in her seat.

"I know. They do grow up so fast. I just wish they could have waited longer before making us grandparents."

...

"It's weird, you know," Shinji says, the ball of light flickering off as they exit the darkened hallway, entering a large white room where spheres of ball lightning reflect off mirrored projectors, "It's gotten to the point where I don't even get bothered by this sort of thing anymore. NERV is partially run by an AI based on my insane godmother, I go from an only child to having nine sisters in five months, and I pilot a giant robot. This should bother me."

"I'm unsure if you should be telling me this," Hikari says, cocking an eyebrow, "So...wait. The Ree are your sisters. But there's eight of them."

"And Unit-01. It ate my unborn sister and now holds her soul."

"Yeah, Ikari. I'm pretty sure I *shouldn't* be hearing this."

He shrugs.

"Well, don't know how much of what Mom tells me is true," he responds, "But I hope some of it is. I know Mom has a reputation for hiding the truth, but in all honesty...I know she means well. She has to."

Hikari sighs, walking alongside him.

"I know what you mean. I've known Dr. Ikari as long as I've known Rei. She seems like a very nice person."

"If a bit weird. But everyone in my family's weird."

...

"So," Rei says, "I thought we should talk. Because I'm the big sister, and therefor I'm the responsible one, and that means I get to talk to you about being irresponsible. Kay?"

The six blue haired girls sit in front of her, sitting in the repurposed briefing room. Well, five, now. Rei walks over, grabbing the green haired one and pulling her up.

"Except for you, Iti. You didn't do anything bad."

"'kay," the green highlighted Ree says, managing a small smile, walking with Rei to the front of the theatre. Rei clears her throat, folding her arms, Iti taking a step back.

"So," Rei says, "Little Mommy's reaa~ally mad at all of you, and me, so we talked about it and since I'm the pilot of Go-kun I gotta now do synch tests all the time."

She sucks air through her teeth.

"Which blows," she continues, "An' I gotta teach Mana how to synch. An do more stuff around the base now. An' so do you."

The five remaining Ree, which for some reason includes Kiko, who had spent the entirety of the Bardiel crisis getting Asuka to Zwei, look up as the door to the back of the theatre opens. Clearing her throat, the new addition enters, standing next to Rei, clamping a hand down on the blue haired girl's shoulder and smiling the wise, sinister smile which sends a chill down their spines. Except for Kiko's.

"Hello, children. Let us establish our ground rules, and how they differ from how Ikari treats you. I do not love you. I do not fear you. The relationship you have with the Command staff is irrelevant to me due to the fact that I am too important to be fired, and if you harmed me it would make my daughter very, very *upset*."

She folds her hands, stretching her arms and cracking her knuckles.

"However, I am not unreasonable. You can earn my *respect*. You are all more than human, and inherit your human mother's exceptional intelligence. You will focus your mania for me, or you will find this entire situation uncomfortable. And if you do manage to impress me, you will find yourself giving something back to the organization that sheltered and nursed you from the cruel, unforgiving outside world."

Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu smirks, narrowing her eyes. She adjusts the

lapels on her lab coat, and grins.

"Now, get up," she says, "You five are my assistants, starting now."

...

The table lights up, forming into a three dimensional image of Tokyo-3 Bay.

"POLARIS satellites have detected a blue pattern heading towards the bay," Ritsuko explains, "From the shape of the Pattern and from the multiple points of origin, this means the Angel operates on a similar system to Israfel. And there's more."

The image zooms in. Swimming along the bay, the vaguely humanoid shape appears. One blue eye at the center of its head, body streamlined to the point of resembling an octopus with four tentacles instead of eight, Misato grimacing as she recognizes it.

"That's the Cherub that chased us," she says.

"Junior labels it Tamiel," Ritsuko responds, "And it's a Swarm-type Angel. Meaning that the one that chased you and got chased off by the artillery was only one of many."

Misato clicks her tongue.

"Great. So let's get Shinji and Uri out of the male bonding experiment and get the Evas prepped. What's the status of Unit-07?"

"Sohryu's finishing the armor. Mana's been making some progress due to the incident with the Reego, but we're still cautious. Rei's enroute to Go-kun."

Misato nods, staring at the image of the cherubim. Rolling her neck with an audible crack, she turns on her heel and begins to the door.

"Okay," she says, as the hologram fades and Ritsuko walks after her, "The *Over the Rainbow* is in dock at the harbor. Load up Unit-07 on it and get it ready for launch. Prep a VTOL while you're at it."

"A VTOL?" Ritsuko asks, "Can I ask why?"

"Because the Cherub's got targets," Misato responds, "We've established that they chase after Shinji, Asuka, any Ikari, and me. So I'm going to

bait that son of a bitch."

...

The five girls are assembled in front of the six eyed mecha. Each of them are in full smocks, welding gloves and masks, hair nets over their heads and padding over their backs and shoulders even over the NERV uniforms they are wearing. Clearing her throat, Kyoko checks the work list and turns to them.

"Girls, we are assembling the final shoulder joints on Unit-07," she states, "Your jobs are as follows. Siyon, Hatchi. Work with Crewman Daniels and help him direct the crane that is lowering the join in place. Nana, Kiko, use the bolt guns provided by Byrons to secure the joint in place according to the schematics. Zyuu, you are with me."

The girls separate, walking to their places, as Kyoko begins up the stairways to the platform overseeing the operation. Trailing behind her, the fully concealed girl says nothing as Kyoko dons her own apron and welding mask, pulling on the gloves as the joint begins to lower into place.

Her PDA chimes, and she reaches into her pocket, taking out the ear piece and sliding it on.

"Yes?"

"*Kyoko,"* Yui's voice says, Kyoko rolling her eyes in response, "*How are the girls?"*

"Competent."

She sighs, walking to the railing and gripping it, watching as the joint is set.

"Remember!" she shouts, "Follow the directions exactly, or we have to start over!"

"*You're rather demanding of them, Kyoko.*"

"I'm demanding because this is an exact science, Ikari," Kyoko responds, "And we need the Eva fully armored. We don't have time for games or jury rigged explosives, and it wouldn't be horrible for them to have an idea of how much work goes into *fixing* things."

"*Calm down. The girls mean well.*"

"Which is why you mollycoddle them and why Rei came to me with this idea."

"*Which makes sense for her. Rei has been warming up to you. I am unsure why Kiko is there, since she didn't do anything wrong.*"

"From what I understand, once Rei outlined her plan for punishing the girls, Kiko asked to be included."

Silence on the other end, broken by Yui clearing her throat.

"*I see.*"

...

"I guess the most frustrating thing about this is that I think I'm happy with it."

Exiting the corridors and into a domed room, Shinji shrugs, dispersing the light ball. Hands thrust into his pockets, he walks alongside Hikari, the two in a comfortable silence.

"Really?" she asks, "Because you're not sounding happy."

"I'm afraid I'll screw it up," he responds with a heavy sigh, "I spent ten years living with my aunt and uncle. They did a good job with me, but I always wondered why Mom and Dad sent me there. When I found out they raised Rei instead of me, I was a little pissed."

"Then you met your others sisters."

He nods.

"They...had their hands full," he admits, walking alongside her as they cross the domed room, "Rei was trained to pilot Eva almost from birth. Asuka...well, you know the story. And I was given a pretty normal childhood."

He sighs again.

"You know, I have a lot of people to apologize to," he continues, "I've pretty much ignored you and Touji. I've been a jerk to Uri. I've taken a

lot of this for granted."

The ceiling parts, cut open. Descending, cocooned by his AT Field, Uri touches down in front of them. Snapping his wrist, the sword in his hand disperses, as he stares down Shinji.

"Okay," Shinji says, "Where were you?"

"Finding you," Uri responds, "I took a short cut. An Angel's coming."

"Swell."

Hikari grimaces, and elbows Shinji in the side, eliciting a pained grunt.

"Okay, okay," Shinji sighs, scratching his head, "Uri, I'm sorry."

Uri folds his arms.

"Explain."

"Not making it easy on me," Shinji grimaces, scratching the back of his head, "Okay, fine. I'm sorry I've been a jerk to you. I'm not going to justify it, but I've been a jerk to you and I'm sorry about it. I...just didn't like you back when we first met. You rubbed me the wrong way, and I guess I just kept jumping to Asuka's defense. I never really realized that you were trying to help her, to."

Uri nods, sighing.

"I have to apologize, too," he says, "Ikari, you've helped my sister. In all honesty, I was afraid that her becoming close to you would take her away from me. I've never been the best brother, but I have tried, even if that was...never enough. But what you've done for her...well, I will admit I may be jealous."

Shinji extends his hand.

"And," Shinji adds, "I'm...sorry...about...well. You know."

"Never speak of it again," Uri responds, "Never give me details. And if you ever hurt her, I will break you like plate glass."

"If I ever hurt her, I will let you."

Uri nods, taking Shinji's hand in a firm handshake.

"Great," Hikari says, "Are we done? Are you two going to be civil, now?"

They both nod with a grumble, the doors opening on the other end of the dome and Asuka walking in.

"Good!" she says, "Finally! Now, everyone out! Th-they're about to launch Unit-07!"

...

"*Start entry sequence. Releasing muscular locks and setting pilot interface language to Japanese."*

The darkness gives away to artificial light, numbers and symbols typing along the entry plug walls. Gripping the controls, the gloves of her green and gold plug suit creek along. It is her plugsuit, her official plugsuit. Bulky olive gauntlets over white lined sleeves, white piped leggings, the gold plated discs on her hips glowing in time with the red circular monitor on her chest.

This was Makinami's old plugsuit. The one she had before she died for a few weeks. They took it, refitted it with several systems from her SUIT. The exoskeleton, the heavy armor replated, worked into the padding. She doesn't need the rebreather for the LCL, the connections in the back removed and replaced with the A-10 connectors on her head.

"*Second stage reached. Ionizing LCL and setting Plug Depth to 1.02."*

Mana grimaces. She can feel the pulling on the back of her mind. The same, but different from the smooth interface she had in Jet Alone Prime. More taxing on the mind. It makes her think. It makes her

"*Heee~ey."*

She starts, looks up, as Rei's face appears in the corner of her vision.

"*What'cha doin'?"*

"Getting ready for the fight," Mana says, as the walls of the Entry Plug go clear and she sees the launch deck of the *Over the Rainbow* around her. She clicks her fingers along the buttons in the butterfly control.

"*Remember, just relax. The Eva knows what to do. So do what you gotta*

do."

"That's the advice you have?" Mana sighs, "Not helping me. I don't *like* my Eva like you do."

"*Weee~ell, I like to think out of the box. It helps me. Maybe it'll help you!"*

Mana grumbles, hearing the voice of Ibuki over her head set. 41% synchronization. Well, that *sucks.*

"*Contact's set with the bridge. They are launching the Over the Rainbow!"*

The carrier, as long across as several Tokyo-3 city blocks, shudders as the anchors retract. Kneeling on the flight deck, Unit-07 is silent save for the steady glow of its six eyes, slightly rocking with the motion of the boat. Mist sprays against the black and blue armor, the Eva held down by the cables as the armor glows in the mist.

five times as long as an Eva is tall, bristling with weapons, its aircraft compliment traded in favor of the Evangelion, the UN's megacarrier casts off.

And the Queen Elizabeth-class *Over the Rainbow* sets course, a VTOL taking off from its flight deck to fly ahead.

...

"Over the Rainbow has launched," Makoto reports, at his station as the desk of the Commander rises, "Go-kun is taking position at the Point 3 of the Triangle Defense."

"Try not to wreck the super carrier," Pieter says, walking up next to Ritsuko, "Just got a call from Asuka. Her experiment's successful and she's bringing Shinji and Uri to the cages."

The Big Screen flashes, showing the outer edges of the Tokyo-3 harbor, where production models of the Positron Cannon are mounted. Massive cannons large enough to be wielded by Evas with two hands, they glisten in the mist, lines of blue glowing as their inborn N2 generators are being brought online.

"Unit-00 has activated," Maya announces, "Mari is in the new cockpit.

We're reading full Core activity."

The screen switches to Cage 6. Unit-00 straightens up, the lines on its streamlined, single eyed head glowing. The head has been replaced, making it longer and narrower. Its head comes to the tapered point of the single eye, as a focus for its pilot, now sitting in the cranium.

"Let's get this show on the road," Pieter says, clasping his hands behind him, "Junior?"

...

Deep in Sheol, in the area classified as the Graveyard, there is a single apartment. Originally, it was designed as either intense lockdown or an overseer facility, but upon receiving their guest and defector, it has been converted for his use. He does not mind- he is not human, and hence finds little need for human contact outside of those he considers friends. He does not wish to blend in or meld with the human population, unless necessary.

And since he is the only of his kind, his solitude is...welcome.

"Woot. Big fight."

Junior turns, as the clear tube begins rising from the floor, filling with LCL as his interface with Central Dogma. The red haired girl, a little younger than Miss Sohryu, standing taller and prouder than her and with her hair falling down her back, stands in the doorway of his alcove.

Of course, Junior knows what she is. He can sense her, even if he was too distracted to sense her approach.

Zophael.

"Wuffles," she says, eliciting a shudder from him, "Getting ready for the big bang? Tamiel's never been the type to take a hint."

NERV needs my advice. I will do so. Tamiel threatens too many.

Zophie nods, shrugging.

"Well, if you wanted to really give them some advice, it'd help to, y'know, not bullshit them."

Junior floats over to her. He shifts his eyes to a horizontal configuration, mouth tendrils twitching.

Explain.

"You told them you have no memory of where the Angels came from, or what we want," she responds, "But that's a lie. I know everything. I know that you haven't told them everything. You've been holding back."

NERV does not need that knowledge. It does not help them.

He turns back to the cylinder. Zophie grabs his arm, turning him around.

"Bull," she says, "Because they need to know what they're fighting. It's not just about Father."

Too much information breaks them. Knowledge without wisdom is poisonous. For us, and for them. Is this because you wish them to know, or because you wish to be viewed as something other than a child?

She steps back. The conflict on her face is evident, and Junior responds, placing a hand on her shoulder.

I am aware. We are two incarnations of the same Angel. I am the master of the Song, and you chief of the Choir. We are both burdened by what we know. But this is not the time to discuss this.

He floats back, into the cylinder, which closes around him.

Pieter. Link accessed. I am attempting to access the Cherubim's Overmind.

...

Clicking the buttons on the butterfly controls, Mari grins. She can feel herself connecting with the dormant Core of Unit-00, the blank red sphere installed at its heart. The thing is, she understands. She knows that when she activates Unit-00, she puts a piece of herself inside it, and retracts it when she finished piloting. She does not synch with

Zero. She becomes Zero.

"Alright," she purrs, as the Unit comes to life, her S2 organ, located where her Appendix once was filling her with warmth, "All systems are go. New cockpit's working like a charm, Doctor. Any chance I can get leather seats?"

She slides her plug suit clad butt against the metal and plastic. Soft enough, but doesn't breath.

"*Leather gets nasty in LCL,*" Akagi responds, "*We don't want to have to hose off Unit-00's head every time you sortie."*

"Fair enough."

The link shuts off. She grins, lying back.

"Well, this is my Epic Mount," she says, adjusting her glasses, "Lemme see. I might want to upgrade my Mount, to."

She opens a camera via Unit-00's sensors, and sees Uri and Shinji entering the Cages, following Asuka. Well, she has ruled out Uri as her epic mount. Meaning she might have to find another. So, options, options, she thinks.

And she doesn't really notice her gaze wandering over to Shinji.

...

The carrier cuts through the water, turbines propelling it at speed. Unit-07 begins to rise, cables releasing as the VTOL accelerates ahead. The cargo door opens, Misato holding onto the rope attached to the ceiling, the grenade launcher in her free hand as the VTOL begins to descend.

"Get close for them to smell me!" she yells.

Close enough, as it turns out, is right then and there. An arm breaks the surface, green and bone white, three fingers extended towards the VTOL. With professionalism and a lack of shrieking, the pilot pulls up, the craft accelerating upwards as the main cannons on the Over the Rainbow sever the Cherubim's arm.

More arms begin rising, breaking the waves, the Over the Rainbow opening fire into the waters as Unit-07 sluggishly rises, the deck

opening on the carrier to reveal a dozen Progressive Lances.

"Alright!" Misato yells, slamming her fist against the bulkhead, "Turn us around! Take us back towards Tokyo-3!"

One clears the waves. It shifts, taking its humanoid shape, as large as an Eva and with its blue eye glowing. Grimacing, Misato brings up the grenade launcher and fires as it approaches the VTOL, exploding a grenade against the Core and sending it spasming back into the water.

"Double time!"

...

Deep within Sheol, Junior can sense it. It is coming. He did not see it or feel it at first, the raging torrents of Tamiel's Overmind shifting and churning like boiling water. It overpowered all else around it, but now Junior sees. He senses the presence, long thought dead.

Pieter! There is a complication!

He releases the cylinder. Floating through the glass, he takes off at speed, out the apartment doors and into the Graveyard itself. He has to get to the surface. Something is coming.

...

A progressive lance flies, impaling one of the Tamiels through the head, the Core cracking and the creature dissolving into LCL, a quickly expanding puddle on the surface of the ocean. The Over the Rainbow has begun its turn, firing its broadsides as the aquatic Cherubim continue their pursuit, chumming the waters with their remains.

Inside the plug, Mana still feels the sluggishness, the pulling at her mind. That can wait, she thinks, hefting up another Lance as the explosions dot the ocean.

Which is when she notices the ping on her radar. Calling it up, she sees the sonar image, the full circle forming before noticing the shape approaching. It is almost as long as the Over the Rainbow, she realizes.

"Oh, f_."

It breaks the waves. It launches itself out of the ocean as the main guns fire, rail cannons firing aluminum projectiles at Mach 8 at the creature.

White flesh dotted with eyes, its body flat and long, flat and wide, its fins trailing around it like tendrils as its opens its massive, tooth lined maw that runs half of its own length. Mana screams, partially out of terror which she would never admit, and partially out of frustration of having to deal with this.

And the entire Over the Rainbow lurches as Gaghiel slams into the Eva.

Chapter 86: Hammer Time

Her reactions are sluggish. This was so much easier when she was piloting JA Prime. It was all mechanical and AI then. It was all simpler then. She didn't have to deal with her moeblob subconscious or her girly AI fork.

"C'mon," she growls, staring down the open maw to the red gem down the lines of sharp, people sized teeth, "C'mon! Gimme a little help here!"

Nothing. She can feel the pressure, feel the pain. Her synch ratio isn't enough to even project an AT Field, much less repel the aircraft carrier-sized sharp currently trying to eat her.

"Damn it," she growls, "Damn it. Damn it!"

Well, that's it, she realizes. She's failed. Jet Alone was easy, compared to this. Her synch score blows, the Angel is about to kill her. All because her AI is as damn stubborn as she is.

"Damn it," she says, voice barely a whisper, "Help me. Please."

Which is when the A-10 connectors spark to life. Life returns to the plug, to the sympathetic limbs she feels herself controlling.

"*Synchronization at 61%. Level 2 functionality unlocked."*

Unit-07's limbs move, grabbing at the upper jaw of Gaghiel before bringing its foot up into the red gem. It does not shatter or crack, but the beast roars.

"*Synchronization at 79%. Level 3 functionality unlocked."*

A small smile in the back of her mind. A small voice telling her they can work together on this. A small voice thanking her for asking, not telling, as the bound mouth of the Evangelion emits a growl and the sky shifts to orange, Gaghiel lifted off the deck by the manifesting octagon.

"*Synchronization at 103%. Level 4 functionality unlocked. Access granted to the Dirac Armory. Weapon selection?"*

"Take a wild *f_ing guess.*"

The air in Unit-07's right palm shifts, split open by a beam of white. It lances out to a shape as long as the Eva is tall, wrapping around itself, tappering off at one end in a massive shape...

Which, when the light clears, reveals itself to be an Evangelion-scaled warhammer.

"Oh yeah," Mana says, Unit-07 pulling the hammer back, "Come on, *fish bitch! It's*-"

Chapter 86: Hammer Time

Misato grins as she sees Unit-07 hammer Gaghiel in the face, kicking it off with a punt to send the carrier-sized Angel back into the water. The thing is, Misato muses, they should have been able to detect it. POLARIS only detected Tamiel, and that thing is bigger than half the Tamiels combined.

So why didn't it read a Pattern Blue?

"Okay, carrot's dangled," she yells, "Radio Admiral Conker and tell him to turn the Rainbow about and make speed back to Tokyo-3!"

She flips open her phone, jamming down the send button.

"Pieter! Problem! We've got a carrier sized zombie Sixth Angel and it's joined in the fun! Authorize Rei to use Go-kun's full weapon suite and get Unit-00 and Zwei out, ASAP!"

The Sixth Angel continues circling, *breaking* off and speeding away, making a long U-turn before speeding towards the Rainbow. And ramming head first into an AT Field, followed by Mana's whoop, as the rail guns on the *Rainbow* fire into the water, boiling steam and sending a bissected Tamiel down into the depths.

Engines speeding, the UNS *Over the Rainbow* cuts through the water on its route back to Tokyo-3. Gaghiel trails behind, the bloody gash across its jaw from the hammer blow healing, flesh melting to LCL before reforming. The rear guns on the *Leviathan*-class aircraft carrier fire, blasting chunks from the pursing creature and the horde that is Tamiel behind it as the ship approaches Tokyo-3 bay.

Which is when the sea erupts in shells and explosions as the two *Iowa*-

Class battleships waiting at the harbor open fire, followed by the lancing beams of the Positron Cannons.

...

"Pincer attack has begun," Aoba reports, as the sea begins to turn yellow and red, "Total Cherubim count down by 12%!"

"So now we just have to worry about the aircraft-carrier sized fish," Pieter growls, "Mari, you're on point! Start firing on the Angel! Rei, herd the Cherubim!"

He turns, to shout something towards the Commander. But finds Gendo's station is now empty.

...

Rising from his haunches, Go-kun's shoulder fins open, the steady yellow glow matching the build up of the plasma cannons. Inside the entry plug, Rei claps her hands together and squeals as the holographic control board appears in front of her, all the weapon controls clearly labeled.

"*Rei, the targets are incoming. Once they are in Tokyo-3 bay, you are authorized to cut loose. Avoid hitting the Over the Rainbow and Unit-07. Understood?"*

Rei's response is another high pitched squeal, tapping the buttons as spinning squares begin appearing on the water.

Inside the Entry Plug of Unit-02, Uri's hands grip the controls. Already he is synched with Zwei, the AI of his chariot welcoming his presence warmly. So different than before, he muses. So different than those days of pride and stubbornness, where he could be relied on to squander what he had to his own- and to Mother's- demanding ways.

"Ready," he whispers, "Follow my lead, Zwei. Mother, Asuka. Let's begin."

He will protect them. He knows what he was born for. He will *protect* them.

...

Cage Three's normal maintenance staff have accepted the idea that Unit-01 is not going to sortie, even if there is a Cherubim attack. After all, there are four Evangelions being deployed. What difference would Unit-01, especially with the temper mental behavior of the AI as of late, make in the battle?

So it is no small surprise when Commander Ikari enters the cage, followed by the Third Child, Shinji already changed to his plug suit as the Commander grabs a spare set of A-10 connectors from one of the dumbfounded technicians and begins affixing it to his head.

"Really wish you'd let me in on these things, Dad," Shinji mutters.

"I would, but you've been in bonding therapy with Sohryu for the past two days."

"Very funny. Seriously, what are you doing here?"

Gendo smirks, walking up the catwalk, Shinji following him as they approach Unit-01's conspicuously extended Entry Plug.

"Taking the Lieutenant's advice," he says, "The problem is, Shinji, that your mother is very, very maternal. She mollycoddles, she listens, she makes decisions with the welfare of everyone in mind. This is, on its surface, an admirable quality. However, she has yet to accept that there are some circumstances where this does not work."

"Like now," Shinji responds, as the hatch of the plug opens, "You want to get in the plug with me."

Gendo nods.

"Your mother has the best intentions," he says, "But she is also their mother. Now it's time for Ichi to listen to her father."

...

The Overmind of Tamiel shifts. It senses the mass it swims alongside. The shadowed husk of what was once the great Roaring Beast, Gaghiel. It can sense the mindlessness, the rage within it. But not the Presence, the mark of it being one of the Angels. It is but meat and

anger.

There is no overmind. There is but meat.

And so one of the Tamiel swims down, thrusts of its AT Field letting it gain velocity. It spins, streamlining its body, thrusting through the water like a stabbing knife before rising in front of the Gaghielim.

And as the beast opens its jaw, Tamiel swims in.

...

Maya squints at the monitor, looking up at the Big Screen before turning back to Pieter.

"Sub Director, the MAGI is reading some odd reactions inside the Sixth Angel."

"Define 'odd.'"

"The Angel is showing signs of a Blue Pattern," Maya says, "And the Tamielim count is decreasing."

Pieter blinks, and turns to Akagi.

"Well, there's a pretty good explanation for that," Ritsuko says, "It's adapting."

"Layman's terms, Doctor."

"The Cherubim knows that Gaghiel is not emitting a blue pattern," Akagi explains, as Ritsuko reads off the dropping numbers, "But Gaghiel is as large as the Over the Rainbow. That means he has a lot more mass. Which means, it's doing something similar to what Iruel did with Rampel."

Pieter swears.

"Well, great," he growls, "Rei! I need you to open fire on Gaghiel, full salvo! Uri, Mari, we need you deployed and at the Harbor, *now!*"

"Spike in the blue pattern," Maya announces, "AT Field is taking new shape! MAGI classifying it a Pattern Sepia!"

...

The skin shifts, pulsing and bubbling as the Tamiel pour into the open mouth. Writhing, Gaghiel dives, deep into the depths, below the surface and visual light as the shifting skin and muscle sending rumbling waves splashing against the concrete walls of the fortress city's bay.

...

"Okay, Pattern Sepia is what?" Pieter asks.

It would be something very bad.

Floating up from the floor, Junior braces his arms against the floor vent and rises, the bridge officers to their credit not reacting to the flatfish angel as if he were anything out of the ordinary.

"Pattern Sepia is an 'unclassifiable' phenomena in the MAGI," Ritsuko explains, "The last time the MAGI logged a Pattern Sepia was during New Vegas. When Unit-01 went berserk."

Pieter blinks, turning to the screen as red hexagons appear over the walls and alarms blare.

"Okay," he says, "Someone tell me what the Commander's doing. And then get me a line with Berlin. We may need to borrow the Mark 06."

...

Stage Three. Synchronization: START.

The world coalesces into a green, grassy field. Two figures appear, as outlines first, then forming into solid bodies. Gendo blinks, craning his neck. He is no stranger to the interfaces, but rarely would join his wife. Shinji, on the other hand, is a natural. Perhaps it is because of his relationship with the Eva.

"Okay," Shinji says, scratching his head, "That worked. We haven't even been able to get a basic synch ratio for the past couple of weeks."

"I know."

Which is when they see the third figure. The six year old girl in a purple and green dress, holding a stuffed purple and green dragon in her arms.

"Ichi?"

"Hi," Ichi says, "Shinji. Daddy. Thanks for coming."

Shinji just smiles, walking over, dropping to his knees and pulling Ichi into a hug. She returns it, burying her face in Shinji's shoulder, the two siblings silent with their father watching. Slowly, they disengage, Ichi still holding onto Shinji's hand as she turns to Gendo.

"So," Gendo says, "Ichi. You wanted to talk."

Ichi nods.

"I'm sorry I hurt Mommy," she says, "That's why you never came to visit me."

Gendo sighs, squatting down to eye level.

"Ichi, it wasn't your fault," he says, "It...was Unit-01-"

"No," Ichi says, shaking her head, "I am Unit-01. I never was Rei Ikari."

...

A deep rumble from the sea floor. Tokyo-3 shakes, rumbling, the earthquake proof buildings standing unfazed as the floors shift. Several people stumble, a handful fall outright, even in the bunkers deep in the Geofront where the non-emergency population has been evacuated to.

And Pieter grimaces.

"That's not good."

No, Pieter. That is almost the exact opposite of Good. I would classify it as Doog.

Junior flicks his mouth tendrils, as alarms shriek, graphs appearing alongside the Big Screen with labels of 'S2 count' and 'Biomass Alerts' as the waters of the harbor begin to churn as the Over the Rainbow turns about and circles the bay waters to give it a wide berth.

...

The water roils, the docks drenching in the wake. And the first of tentacle rises, a ribbed brown thing as wide as an Evangelion, spikes lining it.

Another joins it, and then another, a ridged back as long as the former Gaghiel breaking the surface, a massive shape overshadowing the harbor as it enters. It becomses upright, the tentacles orbiting it, wrapping around it like its brother Zeruel, eight red eyes along the great snout that unfurls from the lump that becomes the head.

It stands a half mile tall. Coral skin covers it like armor as it opens its dagger lined snout. It roars, filling the air with the stench of rotted meat, the ineffectual hammering of the battleships ignored as it advances upon the city.

"Boo~oring," Rei says, "I fought Cthulu. And he was way scarier than you!"

...

"No," Shinji says, hands on Ichi's shoulders, "No, Ichi, you're not Rei Ikari. We've known this for a long time. But that doesn't matter."

Ichi looks up to him.

"Really?"

"Really," he responds, "Because look at it this way. How did you realize...well, Dad, what did happen after the experiment?"

"Unit-01 began sending out probes," Gendo responds, hands in his pockets and overshadowing the two, "Yui's theory is that the Contact Experiment jostled whatever consciousness was in Unit-01's Core. Whatever was in Unit-01 at that point was not sentient or sapient, but the sudden infusion of human genetic material in it acted as a shock to the system."

"So the Contact Experiment brought Unit-01 to life?"

"Correct, Shinji," he responds, "Roughly two years after the experiment, Unit-01 managed to connect with the terminal your

mother used, and asked a question."

"Are you my mother," Ichi says, "She said 'yes.'"

"Which has never been false," Gendo responds, "I don't understand the process as well as your mother does, Ichi, but there is a part of my daughter inside you. It's like a grain of sand at the center of a pearl. I used to thing that she was trapped there, but the truth is she served as a basis for you. You *are* Unit-01. You are not Rei Ikari, but Rei Ikari helped create you."

"And more importantly," Shinji says, looking Ichi in the eye, "No matter what you are, no matter what you choose to be, you are still my *little sister*."

She smiles, faintly, shakily.

"Really?"

"Always," he says, "No matter what. I am so sorry for scaring you like I did. I only did that because I wanted to protect you."

She reaches up, cupping his cheek with her hand.

"It's okay," she says, "You're my big brother. You just wanted to protect me. And I've been the baby for so long I just wanted to stay that way. I got used to being the child, as my sisters grew up and things kept changing."

She looks up to him, a faint, sad smile on her cherubic features.

"If I'm no longer little, will you still protect me?"

He pulls her into a hug, standing up with her in his arms.

"I will," he says, "I will always protect you. I promise."

"Good," Ichi says, as her eyes begin to glow, "Now, it's my turn to protect you."

Which is when the virtual world is consumed in white. A pulse rocks the cage as the chest bindings of Unit-01 shake, the Core beneath beginning to thrum. In Central Dogma, new warnings blade and ring, Maya's eyes going wide as she reads her console.

"Doctor Akagi! Unit-01's Core readings are going off the charts! MAGI is coming back as pattern unreadable!"

On the catwalk in front of Unit-01, Gendo Ikari opens his eyes. At least this time, he thinks, he's not naked. He watches as wires disconnect from the Eva, droplets of bakelite and LCL beginning to rise as the green piping on the armor shifts to white.

"That's my girl," he says, and turns to the frozen technicians, "Everyone out! Now!"

...

Within the Core, there is a change. A decision. A new awakening. Two blue eyes open deep within the recesses of the Core as a new consciousness, or more in particular a changed consciousness awakens.

"**Third Child recognized.**"

In the Entry Plug, Shinji opens glowing red eyes.

"Synchronization at 300%. Evangelion, Mark-01."

The Eva's eyes flash, glowing blue.

"**RISE.**"

The jaw bindings snap, and the newly realized Mark-01 roars. It is not a howl, it is not a shriek, as the catwalks disengage and the piping of the Eva glows pure white. In the entry plug, Shinji grins and grips the controls.

"**Level 8 functionality: Online. Target selected.**"

The Eva begins to lurch forward, the air around it shifting and the air turning purple.

"**Zero Shift: Engaged.**"

And with a flash of light and roar of air, the Mark-01 disappears.

...

A blast of the jets along its back and Unit-07 takes off, launching off of the deck of the Over the Rainbow and swinging its hammer into

Tamiel's face. The Angel snaps back, its jaw enclosing around Unit-07's torso as the hump behind the head pulses and shudders.

Cluster bomblets of angelic flesh like fireballs blast out, raining down upon Tokyo-3 as a tentacle lashes out and strikes Go-kun, shattering layers of the AT Field and sending the green evangelion back.

The teeth grind, and Mana grimaces, feeling the depressions along her waist and cursing herself for now, of all times, getting her synch ratio up to speed.

And then there is a flash of light and a purple fist slams into Tamiel's snout, forcing it open and dropping Unit-07. Another hand grabs the Eva, and Mana looks up to see Unit-01 before her Eva goes flying, landing gently at the docks.

"Shinji?" she asks.

Eight wings of yellow light like gossamer unfold from the Eva's back. Floating before the Cherubim, the Mark-01 extends a hand. Light gathers at the palm, the blue eyes of the True Evangelion pulsing as the light forms into a solid wall of orange and green.

And then it pulses, and Tamiel is sent flying out of the Harbor.

...

Maya throws her arms up and whoops as the MAGI reads the Angel splashing down three miles from the harbor. Akagi's jaw drops, and Pieter simply stares, just in time for the Mark-01 to pulse and disappear, the MAGI reading a hypersonic line going from its position above Tokyo-3 to its fist smashing into Tamiel's face.

"How is it even *doing* that?" Pieter asks.

"It's accessing its S2 organ," Ritsuko says, voice barely above a whisper, "Mark-01...Ichi...is transcending the limits we placed on it. Free of its bindings, Eva returns to the state it was taken from."

"I understood none of that," Pieter responds, "So is that a good thing, or a bad thing?"

Akagi shrugs.

"As long as Ichi remains on our side, I would chalk it up as *good."*

...

Rei claps her hands together and squeals, gripping the controls at the sight of her little sister kicking the ass of the giant Cherubim.

"Go Ichi!" she shouts, "Alright, Go-kun! No reason Ichi's gettin' all the glory today, right?"

Her mind connects with the Evas. The Dirac armory opens up, layering on jump jets along Go-kun's back, maneuvering thrusters on the arms and legs, and a set of glowing pads along each clawed foot.

Engines rumble, and Go-kun takes off, flaring as the Eva takes off in pursuit of the Angel.

"*Rei!"* Misato yells, "*What are you doing?"*

"Helping!"

...

She has decided to cease being a child. Even if she is not human, it is the humanity that was the grain of sand she built her pearl around. That is the simple truth of it. She is not Rei Ikari. She is Ichi Ikari, the heart and soul of the Evangelion. She is Lilith's better half, she is the weapon of the Lilim against the Angels.

She is all this and she is more, as her ego once more forms within the core. For too long, she let herself remain a child. She let herself remain a baby.

Now she is not so. In the Core of the Eva, in the virtual space that is the egomind of the Evangelion, a twelve year old girl with long chocolate brown hair tied into twin pigtails opens blue eyes for the first time. Her image coalesces with one of the school uniforms she sees her sisters in, the plaid skirt and white blouse, and for a moment she looks down at the shoes and knee high socks. A twitch of her nose, and they disappear, replaced by sandals.

Better, she thinks. And she snaps her fingers again, a set of turtle shell glasses appearing on her nose, like the ones she sees on Asuka's sister.

There, Ichi thinks.

That's better.

And then there are the red eyes in the darkness. She can sense them, she knows. She can feel the heat of the gaze upon her, as she looks up into the depths of her world.

"Oh...crap."

...

Tamiel struggles upright, swinging a tentacle at the Mark-01, and the Eva vanishes, reappearing where it was before disappearing again. Two punches strike Tamiel in the face, breaking off tusks as the Cherubim roars. Tamiel grabs the Mark-01 but finds he cannot move it. Instead, the Mark-01 rises, slowly pulling the cherubim out of the water, before forcing open its with a crack and a spray of blue.

Kicking off, the blue eyes flash. The AT Field becomes a blade, severing the hand as Tamiel shrieks, a tentacle lashing out at the Mark-01 and knocking it from the sky.

In the Entry Plug, Shinji grunts, gripping the controls. Gravity is disobeyed, the Eva stopping its fall above the ocean before flying back, splitting the water as the air around it glows and the Dirac gives forth the gauntlets of the F-type armor, rust colored metal encasing the fists.

A burst of light, and the Mark-01 disappears, reappearing in time with a haymaker to Tamiel's snout, disappearing with Tamiel's swipe and slamming her fist against the back of Tamiel's head.

The Mark-01 disappears, reappearing behind Tamiel as a spray of blue and meat paints the ocean in response to the Evangelion-sized hole now blasted through the Cherubim.

Rising, the Mark-01 extends its hands. The sky shifts purple, energy and heat gathering around it as the ring of compressed energy forms above the True Evangelion's head. Droplets of water rise form the ocean below, breaking into component molecules and then atoms, the eight wings of the Eva rising skyward. The light forms to a crescendo, visible from Tokyo-3 itself as the Eva opens her mouth and roars-

And then the light flickers. The blue in the Eva's eyes snaps shut, and the Eva drops towards the sea.

...

"Okay," Pieter says, "That's bad. Maya?"

"Synch has been lost with the Mark-01," Maya yells, "All input is blocked from the Entry Plug! Core is showing irregularities!"

"Great! Which means *what?"*

"It means there's something wrong with Ichi," Ritsuko responds, grinding her teeth, "Damn it. Where's Doctor Sohryu?"

The Big Screen shifts. Against the backdrop of Tokyo-3, the lift opens and releases Unit-02. Kyoko's face appears next to her masterpiece, as does Uri's own from inside the cockpit.

"*My apologies, Doctor Akagi. Asuka and I were finishing some modifications to Zwei for the plan. I've updated the MAGI and modifications to the current plan are now available."*

"Better late than never, Kyoko," Pieter responds, "Uri! Get to the harbor! Rei's going to lure the Angel back into range and I need you and Mari to concentrate on its core!"

Uri nods.

"*Understood. Zwei, Invert Mode."*

Which is when they notice that Zwei does not have his shoulder fins. The green rods pop out of the shoulders, and with a growl, Zwei takes off in a run.

"Did Kyoko just modify Zwei to go into Beast Mode at will?" Pieter asks.

"I believe so. Sometimes it does feel like we exist for the universe to give people examples of what not to do."

...

The Mark-01 drops. Tamiel grabs it with its remaining hand, the flesh around the wrist stump bubbling before forming into a new, pink and flesh hand, claws digging into the armor as, in the cockpit, Shinji screams. Opening and dislocating its jaw, the Cherubim roars, splattering rotted meat and drool over the True Evangelion, teeth the size of tanks bared.

And then a hammer strikes the mouth, shattering teeth and causing Tamiel to drop the Eva.

On the harbor shore, Unit-07 throws up its arms, Mana whooping before pulling a positron cannon off of its moorings and falling to one knee next to one of the battleships.

"*We got it's attention!"* Mana yells, "*Rei, when we open fire!"*

Next to the other cannon, Unit-00 takes position, single eye glowing as Mari's powers take effect, reflecting and refracting over the lenses that line the head and cockpit. The reactor of the Positron cannon spins to life, a miniaturized N2 reactor producing the power output of Tokyo-3 to bring about the power that allowed them to take down Ramiel.

The barrel glows and a beam lances out, slamming against Tamiel, blasting through his weakened AT Field and burning flesh as shells from the battleships slam into him. Throwing up one hand, a new AT Field manifests, parting the waves down to the Bay, throwing waves up and exposing the sea floor.

"*BUDDHA'S PALM!"*

An AT Field slams overhead into Tamiel, as Go-kun descends from on high, open left hand first. Hovering for a moment, Go-kun flies low, grabbing the Mark-01 by the head and flying back towards the shore. Shaking off the blow, dripping blue from its nostrils and mouth, Tamiel sinks below the waves and pursues.

...

Inside the Core, Ichi sees it take shape. A great beast of shadows and light at field, but becoming more with each pulse of the Core's heartbeat. Twin eyes glow red in the shadow, the pulses running along the white piping of what is both armor and skin.

It is sheathed in a bodysuit of white and black. Vaguely humanoid,

but solid and muscular, the ripples along its form suggests a wild animal...

Or a Beast.

And then she recognizes what it is, from the faceless visage which stares upon her, from the elongated arms which reach out to her, the clawed fingers against her cheek as she finds herself unable to move, the wires nailed to its body wrapping around her arms and legs.

It is The Beast.

It is the thing she fears, the birth of which drove her to hide in her own Core during the battle against Raziel.

"GET AWAY FROM MY SISTER!"

A very human fist slams into the face of the inhuman monster. The Beast reels back, a low, rumbling growl from its sealed jaws, as Shinji's fist connects once more with its face.

And in the still darkness of the Entry Plug, in the depths of the Evangelion's Core,

Shinji Ikari prepares to confront the Beast.

Chapter 87: Family Party

"*Oh no! The Angel's coming to the city!*"

"Wait, from the harbor? I didn't know the city had a harbor!"

"Yes it does, stupid. They blasted out the harbor in 2007 so they could receive shipments. The harbor is actually part of a neighboring city, and is technically the Sagami Bay. The city is just on paper part of Tokyo-3 because it is incorporated into the Tokyo-3 district despite being twenty miles from the city. They used Unit-00 to dig out a harbor and install a lock system in it, and they advertised it as an Eva-scale public works project."

"Boo~ooring."

"ooooooooo. So they can use it to dig? With a shovel?"

"AND EXPLOSIVES!"

Four separate squees. A moment of silence.

"Sooo we're gonna help Momma and Daddy, right?"

"But Granddaddy might get mad if we ditch the Avatar bodies."

"But we won't ditch them, we're just trading them up and connecting them to bodies we can use to help them!"

"You bet, Una! 00-EM, load us up!"

...

In the test cages, four of the six PROBE robots, a third the size of the eponymous Unit-05, resembling the children of the Eva more than anything, come to life. The techs step back, realizing that, yes, the PROBEs have been armed.

"*Okay! Ready and set up!*" Una declares, "*Meet at the surface! 00-EM, override the launch controls!*"

One catapult launches, sending the PROBE to the surface. The second PROBE shrugs, standing straight up.

"*Oo YEAH! Time to play with Momma!"* Duae shouts, "*Launch Me!"*

The catapult shutters, and sends the PROBE surfaceward. The third PROBE shudders. Its right arm opens, revealing a massive, blunt tooth chainsaw, the left hand revealing knives and blowtorches.

"*It's got a Chainsaw!*" Tres squeals, "*And cutting tools! I love you all!"*

The rails electrify and send the PROBE upwards. The final PROBE's eyes light up, and the jaw releases, speakers crackling through the mouth as it throws its head back.

"*LEEEEEEEEEEEEROY JEEEEEENKIIIII-*"

And the PROBE is launched.

Chapter 87: Family Party

Generators come to life, antennae along the impromptu landing pad crackling as the gel field manifests. Based on the principles of the AT Field, or at least those that are loosely understood, it forms a cushion of air and static, a speed reducing cushioning field for catching high velocity projectiles.

Which in this case is the Mark-01, which slams head first into the field, hanging in mid air before flopping onto its back, laying silent and unmoving on the tarmac.

"Unit-01 has landed," Aoba announces, "Go-kun is moving to position. Unit-00 and Unit-07 report they are at ready positions. Zwei has reached ready position."

Pieter nods, arms folded.

"Status on Ichi, Maya?"

"Core is still unresponsive," Maya responds, "There seems to be some sort of cascade failure. All signals are flowing backwards, but the Eva is showing no signs of berserker behavior."

...

Knuckles crack and Shinji stands between his sister and the Beast. The

red and black creature, an effigy of an Evangelion haloed in white, reaches out, the wires along its back stabbing towards Shinji like dozens of spears.

Shinji weaves through them and slams his fist into the Beast's face, eliciting a moan from the creature and cracking the fingers in Shinji's right hand.

In the Entry Plug, eyes closed and A-10 connectors crackling, Shinji grimaces as the index and pinky finger in his right hand bend outwards, an audible crack in the LCL.

In the Core, the Beast moans, grabbing Shinji's throat with both hands, eyes glowing baleful red as the teeth of the Beast grind beneath the mask, squeezing as sympathetic marks appear on Shinji's throat in the real world.

"Hey! Hands off my big brother!"

And the Beast's grip goes slack as Ichi kicks it squarely between the legs.

"Core activity's stabilizing!" Maya announces, "Unit-01 is reactivating!"

...

The red giant takes its position, the rods jutting from its shoulders wet with LCL, sparkling like dew at morning. Deep in the Entry Plug, Uri's eyes glow red, a steady pulsing light over the metal walls. Hands folded in his lap, legs crossed, he lets his mind and Zwei's intermingle.

Just like Asuka told him.

Open yourself to Eva, and it will open itself to you.

"*Synchronization at 98%...101%...105%...*"

His mind links with Zwei's. The outlines of two wings of orange light unfold behind him, as Zwei extends his hands and manifests a wall of orange before him.

Just as Tamiel rises from the water, shrugging off the blasts from the stationed battleships.

"Just a little longer, Zwei," Uri says, "Just a little longer..."

...

"*Rei. I want you to provoke the Angel.*"

Clapping her hands together and squealing, Rei grips the controls. As Tamiel rises from the waters, she links her mind to Go-kun's, grinning as her eyes glow red.

A blast of steam, and Go-kun's drill folds back, releasing from its mount and sliding on a rail to the back between the shoulder fins. Flexing the three fingers of the claw like right hand, Go-kun braces his feet on the dock as Tamiel rises up, flexing its tentacles as it fires off another round of spores skyward.

Cupping his hands at the side, Go-kun's visor glows, his AT Field becoming liquid, flowing between his hands as the sky around him shifts to gold.

And in Central Dogma, Ritsuko's jaw actually drops. For once, the third head of Project E is rendered speechless, without an actual explanation for how Rei is managing to do that.

"Oh, I get it," Shigeru says, "Man, I can't believe it took Rei this long to do tha-"

His remainder of the statement is cut off by Rei and Go-kun's in unison shouting, the Eva thrusting his hands forward in an open-clamshell pose and sending the blast of light and force forward. It blasts out as a beam and sphere, breaking the sound barrier and sending out a bow wave that sends the water back towards Tamiel, before the projectile itself hits and blasts of Tamiel's right arm.

"Oh, yeah," Pieter says, "Now, he's provoked."

...

"*Synchronization at 138%. Level 5 access granted. Access to multi-vector assault mode granted.*"

The restraints release. Sitting cross legged, hands knuckle down upon his knees, he floats through the buoyant LCL, his eyes glowing beneath his closed eyelids. A mental command and on the outside,

two more restraining bolts release, the first ones along the back. Zwei does not growl or roar this time. This time, moreso than that first disastrous time Mother released him, or in the desperate time Asuka did so, their minds are linked.

He can hear the chatter and accepts it. He can hear Mother giving him encouragement, Asuka urging him on.

And further and further down, his mind connects with the AI that is Zwei.

...

"*Mari! You're up!*"

Her fingers dance along the buttons lining the butterfly controls. Her eyes glow, the light reflecting and refracting off the the mirrors lining the head of Unit-00, before collecting at the single cycloptean eye and lancing out into a beam of pink and white.

The blast shatters Tamiel's AT Field, burning the flesh as she wills Unit-00 forward. Her will is the Evangelion's own. Her Core is the Evangelion's own. Breaking into a run, Unit-00 charges, a low moan escaping its sealed jaw as it leaps, leaving the dock as the crystalline armor surrounds the Evangelion.

The material spins, forming into a focused point, the light surrounding and flowing around it as it forms into a shining point at the head of a needle.

Which is when a tentacle bursts out from Tamiel, slamming into the Eva's head.

...

"Direct hit to Unit-00's head!" Maya shouts, *"I'm reading Core damage to Mari!"*

His vision is blurry. His head is swimming, but he can still hear the panic in Lieutenant Ibuki's voice. The A-10 connectors on his head spark to life, the Entry Plug turning transparent, and Shinji grips the controls as the eyes of the Mark-01 turn white once more.

"Okay, that's not good," he mutters, "Ichi! Can we teleport?"

"*Working on that. I think you're going to have to hail mary this one."*

"Hail what?"

"*Just catch her!"*

The Eva rises, flipping to its feet before breaking into a run. Footsteps shaking the docks, the purple and green behemoth leaps, grabbing Unit-00 out of the air, ducking and rolling as both splash down in the bay. Explosives and shells from the battleships hammer Tamiel, the massive creature roaring as it turns about, just as the Over the Rainbow powers into the harbor.

And at full speed, the supercarrier rams the Angel, the progressive lance in Unit-07's hands cutting through the sickly green flesh and bursting out the other side.

"JA-Tan!" Mana shouts, "Now!"

"Accessing Triple Heavy Maser."

The light plays over Unit-07's arm as the Eva releases the spear and the Over the Rainbow puts its engines into reverse. Lines of white extend outward, folding over themselves, forming into the triple flower barrels and the metal bracing, plates appearing as they are drawn out of the Dirac.

And the harbor lights up as Mana fires it point blank into Tamiel's face.

...

The dockworkers run, scattering out of the way as the Mark-01 rises from the harbor. The crystal framed form of Unit-00 collapses to the pavement, oozing LCL from its punctured center eye, still and lifeless. The back plate of the Mark-01's neck opens, the entry plug spinning out as the hatch opens. Dripping LCL, Shinji slides down the extended arm, taking off in a run as he speeds towards Unit-00.

"Dogma, this is Shinji," he yells, "I've recovered Unit-00 and I'm retrieving the pilot!"
He can hear yelling over his comm link, but ignores it. He knows one

of the people running the battle is Sub Director Sohryu, and that he's probably in full panic mode. Running up the arm of the prone Unit-00, he leaps over the chest to the head, grabbing the manual release hatch build into what would normally be the ear.

Yelling as he feels the hot metal burning at his hand, he yanks the door open, LCL spilling out.

"Mari!" he yells, "Mari, are you hurt?"

Of course she's hurt, he tells himself, *She got hit in the face by an Angel.*

Climbing into the head, he sees her, loosely hanging from the seat, the straps keeping her from dropping to the other side of the head. Grabbing onto the handle, he aims himself and drops down to the chair, grabbing her by the arm as he kicks the release for the belts and cradling her as she moans, eyes closed and face pale.

"I've got her! She's alive, but-"

The cockpit shakes. Muttering to himself, he leaps, carrying them both out of the head, landing on the pavement as Shinji sees the light from the Maser's discharge dissipating. The harbor is a war zone. Three Evangelions engaging an Angel larger than a skyscraper. And that means that there is one safe place to go.

"Ichi!" he yells, "Let's go!"

Running up the Mark-01's arm as the hand slams onto the pavement, he climbs into the Entry Plug as it fills with LCL, Mari in his lap as he takes his seat.

"*Shinji, we're reading some weird readings from Unit-01, it's reading multiple S2-*"

The rest of whatever Maya had to say is blanked out when the core at the base of Mari's throat glows. And the cockpit goes white as the Mark-01 activates, a halo of light forming above its head as the air ignites around it.

...

As the sky shifts red, and the air turns still and quiet, Go-kun looks down as something tugs at one of his arms. Looking down, he sees the

four PROBEs, each a third his height, standing at his feet.

"**Okay. This gives me an idea.**"

...

"Physical limiters are disappearing," Maya says, cold sweat appearing on her face as the panic becomes evident, "MAGI says readings are impossible!"

On the Big Screen, everything has frozen save for the Mark-01. Tamiel has frozen in mid swing, the other Evas frozen in mid motion. The halo above the Mark-01's head shifts, folding in on itself, forming int a red disc with a black hole at the center, expanding to cover the entire harbor as eight wings of white unfold from the Mark-01's back.

"What the Hell is happening?" Pieter asks, grabbing Akagi by the shoulder, "Ritsuko, layman's terms!"

"Shinji just brought an Angel into contact with Lilith," Ritsuko responds, "There's a reason we defended Terminal Dogma. An Angel coming into contact with either Progenitor can end the world. With ADAM, it rewrites reality, removing the Lilim and inserting its own ecosystem. With Lilith it makes something that should not be."

"Like what?"

"It frees Eva from the bonds placed upon it," Ritsuko continues, "Creating a cascade of compressed energy, converting the world around it into thoughts running along its own neural relays. It becomes something greater than either Progenitor. A god-like entity. Only at the cost of all life that existed before it."

The floors begin shaking. The Big Screen flickers and goes dark, as the world around them begins to slow in time with the expanding wave of ending time.

"And all at the whim of the souls within it-"

And so time in Central Dogma, to, stops.

...

A moment ago, he was in the Entry Plug as things turned white. Not white as in bright, white as in everything else was gone. But everything else is not gone, now. Now, instead, he's sitting on a bench in a monorail car, circling a blank landscape of mountains and rivers that seem to go on forever.

"Ah, crap," Shinji says, "I ended the world, didn't I?"

The walls of the monorail car pulse slightly. The metal seems to have the faint consistency of marshmallow. He rests his head in his hands, groaning as he does so. A shuffling of feet, and he looks up to find sitting across from him a six year old boy in a striped shirt and shorts, legs dangling on the seat.

"Okay, lemme guess," he says, "My subconscious?"

"*Are you running awa-*"

"Now? Not the time," he says, standing up, "Okay, lemme think. I took Mari into the Entry Plug. I guess, since she's an Angel and Ichi's also an Angel and I guess Unit-01's sort of made from that thing in the basement...this definitely something Mom should have told me."

He sighs, hands in his pockets, which is when he also notices he's in jeans and a sweatshirt instead of his plugsuit.

"Great. So...where's Mari?"

He turns to the boy, who hasn't moved. In fact, he notices the boy doesn't have a face at all, just covered in shadows despite the light shining directly on him.

"Okay, I appreciate that the universe took the time to give me therapy," he says, "But I have to save the world. Stay there."

With that, he walks to the door at the end of the car, and exits.

...

The door opens, and Shinji is immediately greeted by the sounds of shouting, whooping, and grunting. Eyes go wide and he quickly turns around, sidestepping so not to look directly at the act in front of him. There are many people he has never wanted to see naked, and Uri is

one of them. Especially with Mari doing...that...to him.

Unfortunately, turning around allowed him to see the reflective windows, so now he has a better view of that. He and Asuka never did *that.* He's pretty sure that's not *legal* in Japan.

But wait. Uri's in Unit-02. Why would he be here?

"That's because this is mind, silly," the voice says with a giggle, as two arms clad in a loosely buttoned white shirt wrap around his waist, "You're in the layers. The parts of my mind which I use to interact with people. So, what would you say my most obvious layer is?"

"Judging from the use of handcuffs I'm seeing, I'm going to say the part where you keep flirting with people."

He feels teeth on his earlobe. His girlfriend's sister, or at least the psychic representation of her, tightens her grip on his belt.

"Yep," she says, "I like you. You smell like LCL. Which is even better, 'cause I got MAGI clearance. And I know what it is."

He turns around, pushing her back. Backing away, he sees her. The school uniform with the top two buttons opened, the hungry look in her glasses clad eyes as he backs away.

"Okay, Mari," he says, "I don't know exactly what's happening, but something's gone wrong-"

"I ever tell you that Uri shot me down twice?" she asks, "First because I'm 'Ska's sister. And now? Cause we're Angels. I'm thinking if I press the issue, he's gonna use the whole 'let's be friends' line. Then I tried Junior. And he wants to be friends."

Just a little further to the door, Shinji thinks.

"So, I'm thinkin'," she says with a grin, "That I'm more than a little jealous of my little sister. So, you tell me."

The door. He backs up against the door, but soon realizes it isn't the door but the wall next to the door, right as she pins him to the wall.

"Mari," he says, "This is really not a good ti-"

His words are interrupted by her mashing her lips against his and sticking her tongue down his throat. All in all, he's trying not to gag, both from the face that she's doing this way too hard and the fact that

she's *his girlfriend's sister* and in all honesty, there's only one way to get out of this situation with the minimum of trouble.

Grunting, he brings his knee up into her stomach, Mari yelling out, doubling over as he pushes her aside and opens the door, darting through. There's layers to this, he thinks. And if he has a car to himself, and Mari does...

What is Ichi going through?

...

Ichi looks down, to see the six year old girl sitting on the train couch in front of her. A six year old version of herself, in fact, brown hair and blue eyes in the purple and green dress, the plush version of Mr. Flappy in her arms. At first, her look is one of seriousness, as much as a six year old can manage. Then, her face splits in an ear to ear grin.

"You're awesome!"

"I know!" Ichi responds, grinning as she flexes her arms, "I really am!"

"Yeah!" the six year old Ichi says, "You're growing up! You're maturing! And now you can teleport and fly and stuff! That's awesome!"

"And you're *adorable,*" Ichi says, leaning down, ruffling her younger self's hair, "I mean, look at you! Us! You're cute and snuggly and NERV threw us birthday parties with cake and presents! That's *awesome!"*

The car itself shifts, the ceiling layering in balloons, a large cake on a table off to one side. Presents line the floor, going to the ceiling as both girls clap their hands together and squee.

"This is *awesome!*" Ichi squeals, "And you know what? I'm awesome! And why's that, lil' sidekick?"

"Because you're an Eva!" the smaller Ichi says, "And you're big and strong and stuff! And you can go around stomping and roaring but you don't, cause you're the best Eva!"

"I am!" Ichi says clapping her hands together, face split in a wide, toothy smile, "I totally am! I'm a two hundred foot tall superweapon

and I can go and depopulate Asia in like two hours but I don't cause I'm *awesome!* And we've got an awesome Mom and a Dad who fist fights people on teevee and an awesome big brother who protects us even though I've got my own zip code and eight awesome sisters even if I'm pretty sure Kei wanted to drown us and that's *awesome!*"

She holds up her hand. On cue, the little Ichi jumps up and high fives her, before the teenage Ichi picks up her younger self as the little girl squeals.

"And even better," Ichi says, "We're the daughter of the smartest woman in the world, *and* we're like the legs of God. So let's put our awesome brains together and figure out how to fix this!"

...

The next car lead into a hallway of crystals. The door to the next car should be a straight line ahead, but the geometry of the hallway is...odd. To say the least. The crystals line the wall, forming into a curving tunnel that leads into infinity.

"Oh...kay. Mari?"

Hello, Shinji.

The voice comes everywhere, all around. It chimes through the air like a bell, reflecting off of the crystal walls as Shinji looks around. The air shimmers, and he walks to his right. Wiping the frost from the window, he sees through it. It is not the valleys and hills. It is the blasted plane and the shattered mountains, the pillars broken before it. He recognizes it, from his time when Leliel first appeared and they came face to face with the Angels.

This isn't just Mari's mind, he realizes.

"Oh, boy," he whispers.

And from the curves in the landscape, he can tell the shape of the trail that the car travels. A perfect square, at the outer edge of a massive, alien diamond.

The door opens. Hesitating as he steps through, he backs away from the crystal corridor, and steps, one step, into the hallway. Instead of completing the journey into the next car, he stands completely still as

the illusion forms around him, giving him a new image, a new room. Or, a lack of one as he stands on the connecting chains of the train, hovering over the massive diamond now floating before him.

It is larger, he thinks. But that is probably because he never faced it outside of the Evangelion. But he knows what it is- the thing which nearly killed him. The thing which put him in cardiac arrest for fifteen minutes.

"Ramiel."

Yes. Me. I am Ramiel. And Baraqiel. And Zuriel. And many more.

He blinks, as the fleeting image of Mari's eyes play along the crystal. And sighing, hesteps off the link and drops towards the great diamond. The skin shifts, and folds open, welcoming him as he drops into the almost liquid layers of the Angelic overmind.

...

They remember. We remember.

Layer after layer opens for him.

Junior lied. The Angels remember everything. I know where ADAM comes from. I know the extent of the battles between the Progenitors. I remember everything. We're more fucked that you'll believe.

More layers open, guiding him deeper into the structure of the Angel. Deeper into the structures of the Angelic mind.

Look.

And then there is light. And Shinji is standing on a hillside, but looking down he sees he is hundreds of feet, thousands of feet high, over a blasted out crater, a made valley far below. Looking up, he sees the shape on the horizon, the great Giant of Light.

ADAM.

Others flank it. He sees the Angels alongside Him. The octahedron that is Ramiel, gathering light at the points before lancing out beams of force, swatting out the things surrounding them. He sees Zeruel at the forefront, the black mass of tentacles and deaths head mask, as spheres of light and flesh with six golden wings surround him,

dragging him down. More of them, the creatures of flesh and light, swarming forward and attacking the Angels.

Dozens surround ADAM. They grab at His arms, as He flails about, blasting at them with walls of milky white.

"Oh...oh my God," Shinji whispers, "When was..."

Two point three billion years ago. The last time the Angels of Lilith had come. Watch.

And then Shinji sees it. Like ADAM. But three times as tall. A giant, like a mountain given arms and legs, the luminescence of of the titan shining down like a walking Sun. The deep black upon the face, the cool spots of its iridescence which serve as its eyes, look down and for a moment Shinji swears that it is looking at him.

It extends a hand and the battlefield flashes as if struck by flint. The creatures surrounding ADAM whither and burn as the ground cracks.

"What...the...hell...What is that?"

A Seraphim. The highest order of the Angels.

Turning from the giant, Shinji sees the shape coming over the horizon. More of the spheres of flesh and light sweep past him. He watches as they rip Zeruel's core from his body, feasting on it like ripe fruit as the Angel of Might whither and dies.

And he gets a better view as one hovers, like a man sized hummingbird before him. He sees the blood red eyes covering it, the mixture of pale flesh and pulsing light, He reaches out, unmindful of his insubstantiality in this place, and for a moment he can swear the pulsing sphere sees him...and smiles, before darting away.

He watches as Ramiel is taken down, the spheres bursting through it, dismantling its AT Field like cheap paper, coring the massive diamond over and over again. Sachiel stands valiantly, swatting them away, as the massive giant overshadowing them all continuing blasting the ground, wiping away the fluttering creatures.

And then there are the footsteps. The giant is almost four hundred feet tall, eight feathered wings unfurled from the back. Its flesh as the consistency of marshmallow, and it walks like a stalking predator. She walks. Though the mask is like a bird face made of bone, though it strides forward instead of bounding like on inflated bladders, Shinji

cannot mistake what it is.

Lilith.

This was the last great battle between them. The result froze the Earth for millions of years. This is what we're leading to, Shinji. I remember all of it-

And then battle freezes. Shinji looks up as Lilith stares down upon him.

All this has happened before and can happen again, the lyrical voice of the Progenitor echoes in his mind, **This is not a struggle. This is a war. Can you end it?**

And the world flashes white once more.

...

The deep tunnel ends. He can see her face lining the walls, lining the ceilings. It is a tunnel of impossible geometry, but it is no longer a trap. Instead, Shinji can see it is a path, unlike the train itself. Leaning his hand against the cool crystal of the walls, he takes a step and the world rearranges itself.

What was a tunnel becomes a flat plane, a shifting red light at the center. Everything, in every direction, leads to the light. Every direction leads to the light, from the intersecting parallels to the stairs before him that go in every direction. Everything leads to the center.

It is impossibly beautiful.

"We destroyed this," he says.

We weren't given a choice. As beautiful as the Angels are, they wanted to kill us. Don't blame the Lilim for defending themselves.

He continues walking. Down the stairs, towards the Core. Past the memories painted on the walls in watercolor like cave paintings. He can see the memories, impossibly old. Not of Mari, but of Ramiel, of the Angel she has become.

"They need to know about this," he says, "I mean...I was pissed that no one told me rescuing you would put us back on the trauma train, but they really need to know about this."

No more voices as he approaches the Core. The world dims, the red light blocking out the faded twilight of the outside world. Before him is the Core, the pulsing red that is the heart of Mari's existence.

And with a lack of hesitation which he can blame for many of his problems, Shinji steps in.

...

He can hear voices as the red light clears. He recognizes the main voice, though. Walking through the darkened corridor, the only light is the overhead spotlight, shining down upon a metal folding chair in which Mari sits. It reflects off her crystalline skin, her eyes shifting from purple to red as she bows her head.

"You're not even human anymore."

The other paces around Mari. He can see the pain etched on Mari's face, her hands gripping the sides of the chair and leaving grooves.

"In all honesty, should you be surprised about how much I rejected you? You're an abomination. You're an animal wearing human skin."

The woman, tall, blonde hair, a face preserved by face lifts and makeup, circles Mari. He recognizes her, and in all honesty is not surprised. Claire Makinami, Mari's mother, the source of great trauma to many people outside of their own psychological insecurities, continues circling Mari as she berates her.

"A beast. A thing," Claire says, "You're not my daughter. You're not even human. You're not even alive. You're a zombie given succor by NERV because they need-"

Shinji sighs, and walks up to her, tapping her on the shoulder. Claire turns, just in time to get Shinji's fist impacting on her face. She goes down like a sack of bricks, groaning as Mari looks from her fallen mother to Shinji, and back.

"Hey," Shinji says, "Uh...sorry about punching your mom, but this isn't real. We need to go and save the world."

She opens and closes her mouth, words dying on her lips as Shinji takes her hand and pulls her up.

"I know this is weird," he says, "And believe it or not, I've gone through this before. I went through this when we dumped ADAM in the Dirac, and I've been here. Well, not here. The most important thing is to realize is that this is a *trap."*

She nods. She says nothing, but nods. Slowly, tentatively, he places his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to look him in the eye.

"You're Mari," he says, "Not a monster. Not a beast. I know we've said this over and over again, that your mom was wrong, but it's true. You're *not* a monster. We've all said so, your father has said so, Asuka's said it and Junior's said it."

"And I still don't believe it," she says, massaging her wrist, gritting her crystalline teeth, "I'm not human. Not anymore."

"Human or not, you're still Mari," he says, "I mean, have I treated you any different? Has Asuka? Has your father?"

"Dad can't set up the address book on his cell," she says, a small smirk crossing her features, "I don't think he's really able to think about what I am."

"Yeah. He always did strike me as kinda dense," he responds, and smiles, "But he's your father. I think if you weren't you, he'd know. And so would your sister. Although your Mom does strike me as kind of a bitch."

She snorts, a very unladylike thing, shoulders shaking.

"I mean, if you can set off Asuka's mother," he says, "That's a talent. I mean, you out-bitch Dr. Sohryu takes skill."

She chortles, nodding.

"Yeah. You got a point," she says, "You're not exactly helping, but you've got a point."

"I'm good at a few things," he says, squeezing her shoulders, "Missing the blindingly obvious, pointing out stupid plans, and pointing out things people need to hear."

"And a few more things, if Asuka's to be believed."

He chokes, face turning red.

"Screwing with you," she says, smacking him on the arm, "Yeah. My

sister's a lucky girl."

She smirks. Looking away slightly, rubbing her arm, it would be the tell tale sign of something more significant under the surface. However, considering Shinji has a history of not being able to see such things, he does not notice, instead nodding with a smile at her sentiments.

"Damn it."

They both turn, to see Ichi leaning on the chair, a set up video camera with a tripod behind her.

"Yeah, ignore the camera. It wasn't like I was going to record you if you made out or anything."

Shinji blinks, turning from Mari to his sister/Evangelion.

"Ichi? Where were you?"

"While you two were in the Monorail of Woe, I was in the Monorail of Moe," Ichi responds, "And, by the way? I'm *awesome.* I'm so *awesome* and stuff that I figured out how to fix reality."

She grins. It is a toothy, very Rei like grin.

"Oh...kay," Shinji says, "Uh...what?"

"We've got two cores and two S2 organs," Ichi explains, "It's like a power overload. But, instead of causing a short, what we've done is make the Mark-01 into a God. Not little g, but big g. Physics has sort of gone on pause while the rest of the planet is on hold and trying to figure out what exactly to do with us, since a Lilith/ADAM core fusion is generally considered a bad thing."

Mari and Shinji both nod, obviously not understanding the exact ramifications.

"Okay," Shinji says, "And you know how to fix it? Do we...what, take out the other S2 organ? Or disconnect it or...what?"

Ichi grins.

"I've got a better idea. And it's *awesome.*"

...

A great red ring, black at the center, unfurls and eight yellow wings rise from the center. And just as soon as the great darkness, the great Eye over Tokyo-3 appeared, it vanishes. In its place is the Mark-01, white wings unfurled from its back, eyes glowing an iridescent blue.

Three beams of light lance out from the Eva. Each finds their mark- each hitting one of the other Evangelions, as Shinji opens his eyes in the entry plug, turning around to find Mari floating in the plug behind him, curled into fetal position as she glows, a second light source in the cockpit.

"Central Dogma, this it the Mark-01," he yells, "We've successfully averted the end of the world! Ichi's redirecting the excess power into the Evas!"

...

Unit-07 is first. The cockpit lights up, the power reading on Mana's right freezing and the seconds rising. She grins, gripping the controls, as the blue jet strips of Unit-07 glow white, the AT Field in Unit-07's right hand forming into a long handled war hammer.

"Oh f_ yes," she says, "Plan B!"

Unit-07 leaps off the bow of the Over the Rainbow, swinging the hammer into Tamiel's face with enough force to cause the Cherubim to turn towards the city. Which is just when the four PROBEs, hurled just as time began to freeze, reach the cherubim.

Inside the Entry Plug of Go-kun, Rei claps her hands and cheers as the cameras relay the vicious mauling that the Reego-possessed mechas have begun on the Cherubim's face.

"Go for the eyes, Tres!" she shouts, "Go for the eyes! That's my girls!"

...

The cherubim flares, blinded, desperately trying to swipe off the four mechas from its face as they continue cutting, clawing, and welding. Inside the Entry Plug of Zwei, Uri tilts his head. He never knew blow torches had that capacity.

"Right," he says, "Disturbing. Anyway."

Gripping the controls, floating down into his chair, the interior glows a faint, dusky red.

"*Synchronization at 180%...185...188..."*

...

"We need to expose the Core, Go-kun," Rei says, as the holographic controls fold away and the single, rail mounted joystick folds up in front of her, "Ready?"

She grips the joystick with both hands. Outside, eight jet fired anchors shoot out at equidistant points from the Eva, forming a circle of support as Go-kun's knees lock as his chest plates open, revealing the S2 Engine at his heart.

The light gathers at the center, above the engine, reflecting off the polished, mirrored plates of armor. Angling up at Tamiel, Go-kun's jaw releases and he roars, in time with the booming of his speakers.

"**Mega SMASHER!"**

And the beam of light slams into Tamiel's chest, ripping through flesh and muscle. The Reego-controlled PROBEs fire off their jets, flying off of the Cherubim's face as artillery from Go-kun joins the beam of spiral light, blasts from the Over the Rainbow and the battleships joining a renewed assault from the postron cannons as the blood red sphere, the size of an Eva, becomes visible in the haze.

...

"There," Uri says, "Now."

"Synchronization at 223%. Level 6 functionality achieved. Access granted to GUNGNIR."

Zwei raises his hand. A beam of light emerges from either end, white splitting the air and opening space itself as the other restraining bolts emerge from the back. Free from the constraints, free of the limiters,

the Core beats like a heartbeat as the shape forms, summoned from the Dirac.

It takes the form of a metal rod twice the length of the Evangelion's height, tapering off at a spear head, lined with orange lines that glow with a faint pulsing, engines lining the back of the head and the upper portion of the lance.

Engines ignite as Zwei stands, and with a roar the Eva hurls the weapon. The scramjet engines come to life, accelerating the spear to Mach 2 the moment it leaves Zwei's hand, racing its own bow wave as it lances across, faster than can be visually tracked, and slams into and through Tamiel's core.

Blood red crystals paint the harbor. Tamiel screams as the entire body of the massive cherubim begins to glow, and all four Evangelions extend their arms, four AT Fields forming into a dome around the cherubim, and then a sphere, and there is a flash of light and a roar of sound.

And when the light and the roar subside, the remains of what was once Tamiel begin washing against the dock.

"Blue pattern's gone," Misato says, grinning from ear to ear as she hangs on to the railing of the VTOL's cargo section, "Good work, kids. Bring'em on home."

...

The scramjet landed soon after, and the NERV company car speeded towards the base itself. Sneakers and gel padded insoles slapping against the metal floors, Yui balances her purse and her phone as she enters the tram lift to the Geofront, waving her ID and glaring at the security checkpoints.

"Okay, okay," she says, "No, repeat that again, Ritsuko. Explain to me everything that happened to Ichi...what do you mean, *Gendo* got in the Entry Plug?"

She listens some more. Her face pales as Akagi goes over the details of the fight, of what happened. About why everything seemed to freeze as the jet was passing over China. She nods, sighing.

"I agree. Put Unit...put the Mark-01 on deep freeze. Pump in the

cryogenics and bakelite...yes, I'll talk with Shinji. Yes, I imagine he was quite upset about that...Ritsuko, why did the Ree borrow an Avatar body?"

She pales some more.

"Why did you let the Ree into the PR department's fabrication labs?"

The tram ends. Yui runs out of the lift and towards the elevators, jamming the button for floor B14 and hitting the door close button, locking out several interns and junior officers. She paces the elevator, shaking her head, cracking her knuckles. Akagi just gave the Ree free reign of the merchandizing department. What exactly her daughters are making is beyond her. How it could be good, she's doubtful, but these last few weeks have been trying weeks.

Breathing in relief as the doors open, she sprints down the hallway, towards the large doors with the words "NERV PR DEPARTMENT, PROTOTYPE TESTING FACILITY" emblazoned over them. Throwing them open, she strides in. The production lines are still and silent. The only activity is at a set of work benches and a capsule at the far end of the facility.

Walking across the catwalks, she strides across the lab, across the factory, and hurtles down the stairs. The seven girls, her daughters, turn from the capsule to her, all smiles.

"Okay," Yui says, "What are you doing, girls?"

"You're just in tiii~ime," Rei says, "Hit it."

Iti depresses the latch on the side of the capsule. It opens, and a pair of blue eyes flicker on.

"Well, we talked with her about it, and since the Mark-01's kinda dangerous right now, she decided it's best if we sorta made her an extra awesome and special avatar body," Rei says, "Y'know. Use our knowledge for cuteness, instead of destruction."

The face is very much like theirs. It has Yui's softness, her slightly angular, gentle features, but she has Gendo's jaw, his brow. Opening her crystal blue eyes, she looks up, her twin pigtails bobbing as she exits the capsule.

They dressed her in a purple and green sweater and a pale blue skirt. The thematic coloring is right, even if the fashion is awful. But that

does not matter to Yui, as the twelve year old girl in front of her looks at her, and smile.

"Hi, Mom," Ichi says, "I'm back."

Yui strides forward, pulling the girl into an embrace as the tears leak down her cheeks.

"Welcome back," she whispers.

And then the phone rings. Sighing, she takes it out, checking the number and flipping it open.

"Misato?" she asks, "What is it? You're what?"

...

"Yeah, I'm standing in front of a big f_ing hole in my apartment building," Misato sighs, sitting on the hood of her car, at the smoking, partially collapsed building she calls...or at least called her home. The fridge, already recovered from the precarious floor it was on, too close to the collapse to be safely occupied, has already been opened and the penguin is sitting next to her, beer in his hand and muttering curses through his translation collar.

"Yeah, it looks like the theory's right," Misato continues, "The Cherubim did target me. And if it couldn't kill me it certainly went out of its way to hurt me. My apartment building's screwed. NERV'll have to find me, Shinji, and Asuka a new place to live. And Mana and Kaji while we're at it."

She sighs, listens to the response, and closes the phone.

Leaning back, she lies back on the windshield of her car, and twitches her mouth.

"You realize, Pen Pen," she says, "This means *war*."

"*Waa-You're tellin' me, dOOd."*

Chapter 88: Relocation

ALERT

AT FIELD DETECTED

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED

22nd ANGEL: CONFIRMED

The spotlight is empty. All the monoliths are silent save for two, which quickly disappear to reveal the two men they hide. Kozou Fuyutsuki and Katsuhito Ikari are silent for a moment, before Ikari snaps his fingers and a hologram appears. It resembles a shell, or a conch shell, mounted on four spindly legs, a massive serpent of bone running along the top and ending with a skeletal snake head.

"Kaworu refers to it as Galgaliel," Ikari says, "It is a Cherubim."

"Yes," Kozou says, "The odd part is where it manifested. It's on a course not towards Tokyo-3, but towards Washington."

"It could be that it will just continue on the long way to Tokyo-3."

"Possible, but unlikely. We will have to investigate this," Kozou says, "Unfortunately, this limits options. NERV's operations are still limited in North America, with the loss of the Vegas base and the continued fallout from the disaster. Even the bounty I had placed on Shinji's head has done little to alleviate the matter."

"It served its secondary purpose. It focused attention on NERV and allowed the world to observe its actions against Zeruel. That renewed faith in their ability to counter the Angels. It is fortunate we do have the ability to deal with the Angel as it is. Release Level 1 restrictions on the Core and deploy the Mark-09."

Chapter 88: Relocation

"I feel I was denied critical, need to know information," Shinji says, arms crossed as he sits in the chair in front of the desk, "Seriously. Why did someone not explain to me, 'If Mari gets in the Entry Plug with me, the world *ends*'?"

Sighing, tenting her hands on her desk, Yui Ikari allows herself a small smirk. Crisis after crisis has prevented this conversation, which she personally blames both herself and the last few angels- and Lorenz Kihl- for.

"I think we should start at the beginning," Yui says, "Would you like something to drink?"

Shinji shakes his head. Arms folded, jaw set, he stares at his mother.

"Okay," she says, "Shinji, do you remember, right before Mari died, I had you...well, you were interviewed by several people?"

"Yeah," he says, "One of them was Grandfather."

"Yes. Their front name is the Committee for Human Instrumentality," Yui explains, "However, their true name is SEELE. You wouldn't recognize the word, it's German, for 'Soul.'"

He nods.

"Wait," he says, "The guy asking me the most questions...he was...he said you worked for him?"

He sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Like...Keel or-"

"Lorenz Kihl," Yui responds, "He was in charge of the funding committees for NERV. He was our boss. And we believe he tried to have us killed several times."

He blinks, staring at her. Yui taps her console, several chimes as she enters in her passwords, and a holographic screen folds up, and Shinji stares at the information running down it.

"Chairman Kihl is Kaworu's father," she says, "And he was the person Annette stayed with for several years. And, more or less, he and I had a plan, several years ago."

He blinks, again. He looks at the information, taking it all in. He watches, taking in the full depth of the things playing out before him, his jaw dropping as the ramifications are taken in.

"What...what *is* that?"

"Human Instrumentality," Yui says, "Kihl's plan to become a god."

She sighs, rubbing her temples. Her brow knits, and she calls up another file.

"I was originally in on that plan," she says, "With modifications. My plan was that I would remain, inside Unit-01. A testament to mankind."

He turns back to her.

"What?"

"Shinji, my original plan was that I was going to be absorbed by Unit-01," Yui explains, "The contact experiment was not originally an accident. And you were supposed to see it."

...

…

Start entry sequence.

Dummy Plug sequencing complete. Plug depth stable at default values.

Core Activity at nominal levels.

S2 Organ at .25 functionality.

Level 1 functionality enabled.

Evangelion Mark-09.

RISE.

...

The circular shell vibrates as the four spider like legs carry it along. Its tail and neck, an unbroken chain of white bone, shifts back and forth as the animalistic shriek/squeal escapes its bone white jaw.

It barely notices the tank shells exploding against its flesh and shell, continuing its blind mark towards Washington, as it cuts through Virginia on its death march.

And then there is a twinkle in the twilight sky. Something drops from on high, outracing the roar of its engines, the bow wave making the clouds part for it.

A glint of silver upon the sky, and Galgaliel is given a moment to look up and notice the new presence. Then it sees it. A craft, sleek and long, like a spearhead the size of a jumbo jet. Light plays along its featureless surface, the smooth unbroken metal glowing with the throbbing power underneath. As it descends, outracing the roar of its rear array of jets, the skin breaks. Armor revealed, the metal shell fades into petals of orange light, a solidified AT Field for its entry into the atmosphere from NERV-LUNA.

And it descends feet first, slamming into Galgaliel's shell and sending the Cherubim back, squealing.

Landing in a crouch, it rises. The three eyes, one at each side of the head and one at the center of its forehead, between the twin horns arisen on either side of its snout, glow a dull yellow before flashing red.

"**This is the Mark-09,**" the lightly accented, amused voice says, "**I am engaging the Angel.**"

Uncurling its three fingered hands, the Mark-09 extends its arm and lets loose a yellow bolt of superheated matter, burning away a chunk of the shell before the back jets ignite and the True Evangelion charges.

Galgaliel's eyes flash, a blast of yellow lancing out, dispersing against an orange wall as the Mark-09 extends both hands. Another blast from the turbines, and the Mark-09 rises, blasting over the wall, the shoulder fins opening to paint the ground around the Cherubim with red targeting lasers before a cloud of mini missiles explode around it, cracking the shell, exposing the Core at the base of the neck as the Cherubim lashes out with its head like a flail.

The Mark-09 sidesteps, extending its left hand, the blast severing the Cherubim's head, before extending its right hand and blasting the Core.

The red crystal vaporizes, and the Cherubim shudders, before collapsing to the ground and twitching once before melting into a puddle of LCL.

"**Cherubim neutralized. Collateral damage: Minimal. Returning to**

base."

The Mark-09 rises, shifting upwards, and with a blast of its engines it is gone.

...

"I was originally on board with the plan Kihl had," Yui explains, "At the time, following the destruction from Second Impact, Instrumentality seemed like the best idea, and we needed the Evangelions."

"I'm kinda dim on how that involves me being *traumatized,* Mom," he responds.

She nods, sipping her bottled tea.

"The original theory behind Synchronization is that you need a connection with the soul inside the Core," she responds, "What better a way to ensure synchronization than to make the child unable to connect with anyone? What better way than to so deeply traumatize the potential pilot that they become withdrawn and seek out, paralyzed by a hedgehog's dilemma that they can only connect with the soul in the Core?"

She sighs, sipping her tea. Taking off her glasses, she massages the bridge of her nose.

"My original idea was that Gendo was going to raise you. I underestimated how much that would hurt him. We saw on the other worlds. And a few weeks before the Contact Experiment, I got a little drunk and I told him the plan."

"He convinced you?"

She nods.

"Sowed the seeds of doubt, at least," she responds, "And in the Entry Plug, I finally made my decision and aborted the experiment. I was hurt, yes. But I was alive."

She sighs again, rubbing her knuckles. A visible wince on her face, the lines more and more evident in these passing weeks.

"The problem is," she says, "Naoko found the original scenario. That's

why she went insane, we think. She used the original template for Rei, the Dummy Plug system, and changed the parameters to create the Ree, and programmed them to kill me, and maybe you, to save you from whatever fate I had in store for you."

She looks up from her tea. Shinji has not moved, simply staring at her, hands folded in his lap.

"What."

She smirks.

"This...is a lot to take in," he says, and winces, "I'm not supposed to be traumatized, am I?"

"No," she says, holding her hand up, "No, you're not. I revised my plans. They run in almost start contrast to Kihl's. The trouble is, I never told him because I theorized he would have me killed. Judging from his actions, I was correct."

He nods, running his hands over the ends of the armrests.

"That's...that's kind of crazy, Mom. I..."

He trails off. Bites his lip.

"Why'd you change? Why...why abandon it?"

"Because godhood isn't worth hurting my family for," she responds, and sighs, "And when I realized what Ichi was, it made the choice even clearer. But we can discuss this later. I have something else I want to ask you."

He nods.

"As you know, Katsuragi's apartment was...well, trashed would be putting it gently," Yui responds, and sighs, "And NERV is finding a new apartment for her. We're thinking of building it in the apartment building your father and I live in. But in the meantime, Shinji...would you like to live with us?"

...

Katsuhito doubles over, first clutching his head from the throbbing pain, then grabbing his handkerchief and covering his nose with it to

stem the flowing nosebleed as it begins. Glaring behind sharp eyes and dark eyebrows, he climbs to his feet, staring at the tube as the glass clears, and the voice dims in his head.

"That was unnecessary," he says.

The blood red trinket, the size of the Hope Diamond, causes the liquid it is suspended in to boil with a thought. Even diminished, the core and mind that was the Angel of Might is no mere decoration.

And so Tabris has seen fit to torture me. What did you expect, Lilim?

"Nagisa does not know of this meeting, Zeruel," Katsuhito responds, "You may look into my mind if you wish to be convinced."

Another flash of pain burns across Katsuhito's brain. Memories play before him. His wedding, Misao's funeral, long forgotten things and two identical faces. Birth of his children, of his grandchildren, and then-

And then there is a low, rumbling sound.

Zeruel is laughing.

You have found the first of us. You have communed with him. You have seen the truth.

A pause. The tendrils of Zeruel's diminished Overmind retract.

What do you want, Lilim? Why seek my aid?

"Because I can give you what you want."

IKARI.

The room shakes. The glass vibrates and the liquid boils, the last remnants of Zeruel's AT Field conveying his rage, his hunger.

And then it stops.

Why? The ties that bind your Lilim bloodlines are stronger than that. Why sacrifice your progeny?

He pauses, glances down at the stain on the floor that was the last human to attempt to barter with Zeruel. An ignoble sort, who thought to negotiate with the Angel from the delusion it could grant him

power. A sigh, and Katsuhito turns back to the Angel.

I ask again, Lilim. Why?

"You are in no position to bargain with me, Angel," he responds, "Kill me, and Nagisa will have no excuse to keep you around. I am the chairman of SEELE and you are my lab experiment. You are fortunate that what I need cannot be done without you."

Why?

And Katsuhito smiles. It is the same crooked smile he has borne ever since returning from South America. The one he has worn ever since he found himself staring at the creature they returned with.

"Because it doesn't matter."

...

She slips her shoes off, kicking them to the side of the entrance landing, before stepping over it and onto the wooden living room floor. A smirk, and she looks around. Her bags, two suitcases filled with clothes while NERV salvages the rest of the apartment, are next to the leather couch, which looks rather expensive. Considering the spartan living arrangements she went by before...well, not her, but her current host, it's rather impressive.

The couch is one of two, which form an L around a carpet in front of a wide screen tv, coffee table, and game system. Surrounding the carpet and living room itself are the rooms. Two bathrooms, one larger than the other, and four bedrooms. One for the soon to be married couple, one for the children. One has a bunk bed, just in case.

"Hey," Misato says, "I'm back."

Kyoko peaks her head out of the main bedroom, walking out as she rolls up the dusting cloth and drops it on the couch.

"Thanks for setting me up here while they get the new place," Misato says, shrugging off her jacket and hanging it on a chair, "Gotta admit, this place is sweet."

"I figured a dorm style system would be best," Kyoko says, "It gives everyone their privacy."

"Because Uri is *such* a ladies man."

"Let's see where he's going with that harem of his before we pass judgement," Kyoko responds, cracking a smile, "I had them stock the fridge. Not as much beer as was in yours, but there's a respectable amount. And it's mostly german, not the gut rotting swill you normally drink."

Misato cocks an eyebrow. Pen Pen warbles, walking out of the freezer, looking around and grabbing his bags from inside.

"Pen Pen? Where're you going?"

"*Wa-Food giver ain't here. I'm roomin' with him, dOOd."*

"You are aware that will involve you also 'roomin' with the Ree. And the Reego. Right?"

Pen Pen pauses. The warm water penguin sighs, slumps his barely visible shoulders, and stuffs his bags back into the bottom freezer draw.

"Am I to understand that you could understand him before Asuka fitted him with that collar?"

"Yup."

"You must have had an interesting upbringing, Katsuragi."

Misato nods.

"Yeah. I mean, up until the Apocalypse. So, where's the beer?"

...

"So, your father and I contracted NERV to modify the floor below us to a large apartment for the Ree, and now for the Reego as well, as long as the girls are staying with us," Yui explains, stepping out of the back seat of the car as it pulls into the garage, "I already had your things moved over. Which, right now, are a few bags and your cello, as they're still digging through the rubble to find everything else."

Shinji nods, sighing, as he exits behind his mother. The section 2 drivers give him a nod before they drive off, walking across the underground parking garage. It is not that they're unguarded there,

either. Between his own nephilim abilities and the possibility that Siyon is in the ductwork, Section 2 has shown an almost ninja-like stealth ability.

"Okay," he says, "Uh...well, I hope you have a computer..."

Yui smirks.

"Riiight. Forgot who I'm talking to," he says, "So, wait. Did NERV evict the people below you?"

"No. NERV kept the floor below us empty as a security buffer, but we realized that seven superhumans are actually a very good deterrent should anyone ever try to go after me or your father. Also, Rei's moved in with her sisters. So we've been...well, we've set up her room for you. For some reason no one wants to empty out her closet, so we put in a dresser."

"Uh huh...wait...if no one opened her closet before, where did she keep her clothes?"

Yui shrugs, and they enter the elevator.

...

His bags were already in the room. The room itself has changed. Most of the stuffed animals are gone, letting Shinji see the actual bed itself. The walls have been repapered, giving them a blue tone, and the dresser is next to the closet door. The big screen, wall mounted tv is still there, and the desk has a new laptop on it, and while not 'home', it does feel homely.

"Yeah," he says, scratching the back of his head, "I need a nap."

Sighing, putting his backpack down, he walks to the bed, where the half dozen stuffed animals are. He starts tossing them off, eyeing the remote on the night table for future use, tossing aside the stuffed bear, stuffed walrus, stuffed panda, stuffed Sahaquiel, and stuffed Gaghiel throw pillow.

The last one is odd, as the others were wild animals but this one is not. Instead, it is a stuffed cat, with a big bushy tail and gray hairs mixed with his black and brown.

Sighing, he grabs the stuffed cat by the back of the neck and the tail, lifts it up, and moves to toss it. Which is the exact point that he finds out that the cat is not stuffed at all, as it opens slitted, green and yellow eyes, and twists in mid throw with a combination shriek and growl.

Jamming out its paws, the three inch long claws pop out, and somehow, some way, the cat manages to launch itself from Shinji's throw and directly onto Shinji's face.

The scream echoes through the apartment, followed by a sound resembling a buzz saw and a meat grinder. Yui exits the bedroom, perking an eyebrow, and calmly walks across the living room and to Rei's old room, swinging open the door to find Shinji on his knees, four paws and claws on the top of his head, the cat holding his tail up and shrieking like a banshee.

"Merrill! Stop that!"

The cat looks up, and relaxes the hair on his back. Flicking his tail up, he extracts his claws from Shinji's skull and hops off, trotting out of the room. Collapsing against the bed, Shinji feels the top of his head, finding no blood at all. Either the cat was careful, or he regenerates fast.

"Oh, that's Merrill. He was my cat when I was growing up," Yui says.

"That...how old is he?"

"Old enough to know better," Yui says with a shrug, "I think your grandfather experimented on him to extend his lifespan, because cats normally don't live into their forties. He comes and goes. He tends to spend months out exploring Tokyo-3, so you haven't met him before. I think he might not like you, since when you were born I stopped fawning over him and Gendo keeps his shoes hidden so he can't crap in them."

Shinji stares at her. He keeps staring at her, non verbalizing his opinion.

"So, what do you want for dinner?"

...

In the months she's been in Tokyo-3, Asuka has managed to fill a second suitcase full of things she needed. Meaning that her wardrobe, her personal effects, her *life* has effectively doubled. A good thing, she muses.

"Okay," Pieter says, "Mari'll still be in the hospital for a week. Akagi says she's fine, but they want to keep her under observation until they're a hundred percent sure."

He slides his keycard, palming it in one smooth motion, and the door slides open. Taking Asuka's suitcases, he lets her enter, staring at the living room of her father's apartment. It is clean, freshly so. The kitchen table/count is sparkling, the pots in the drying rack, the refrigerator at a mirror shine.

"I had the cleaning staff give the place a once over," he says, "Ikari tends to keep longer hours, so I have to, too. So, I'm not here as often as I like."

"Th-that's fine," Asuka says with a smile, "So, you and Mari live here?"

"Until after your mom and I remarry. Kyoko's still setting up the new apartment."

He doesn't say the obvious thought. He doesn't ask her if she's going to move in with them. Of course, that's still a long road ahead of them. A few months of rapprochement does not make up for nearly seventeen years of awkwardness, anger, and abuse. Even if both have finally made the connection they desperately sought out.

"Yeah," he continues, "So, I'm kind of beat and you're a guest, so I'm not going to make you cook. Want to order out?"

She nods, smiling as she kicks off her shoes. She takes a deep breath, and her sock covered feet take their first steps onto the living room floor.

"I'm home."

He smiles, and ruffles her hair.

"Welcome home."

...

Home, as it is, has become the Makinami Estate, which for so long also housed the abhorrent human being known to the world as Lorenz Kihl. Following his passing, something she feels absolutely no guilt at all for, Kei found herself the owner of much of his research. Some of which had...disturbing...implications.

Still, however, there were notes he only kept on paper. Apparently things which he could not trust to digital media, the final cache of those notes are on the third floor, in one of the guest bedrooms, hidden in a wall safe behind a watercolor painting of no significance. Moving the painting aside, she sees the safe, and cocking an eyebrow finds that the combination is, as her more media-savvy sisters would say, 'the Idiot's Luggaga Number'. Clicking the five ones, she opens the safe.

And sees the thermite charge right before the explosion consumes the room, the floor below, and billows out the far wall to the garden below.

...

He slept well. Once he was assured that Merrill would not attempt to steal his breath, at least. The bed is impossibly soft, Shinji sinking down into it, rendered almost immobile by the soft sheets as he sinks into an exhausted sleep. Snoring lightly, he sniffles a bit. Twitching his nose, he cracks open one eye, half lidded. Odd, being here. He hasn't lived with Mom and Dad since he was six.

Maybe it's because this is new, odd. Misato isn't here.

Asuka isn't here. Yeah, that's probably it. Everything's been whirlwind for the past few days. The Angel, his being forced to live with Uri, then the apartment got...well, pulverized.

"*rrrrrrrr...*"

He cracks open the other eye. The cat is back, curled into a ball on his chest, like a fur and claw covered medicine ball. The softness of the bed causes him to sink deeper, and deeper, the weight of his large, heavy, and impossibly elder cat causing him to dip even further down.

"*Are you my Uncle Shinji?*"

He looks back at the cat. Did it talk? Did it ask if he was related to

him?

"*No, I'm not the cat. I'm in your television. And your phone. And the motion sensors, but I think I'm more differentiating my consciousness among them to get a better viewing angle.*"

"Um...okay. Right. Who are you?"

"*Um...my name's 00-EM A9.*"

He nods.

"Wait...one of Kei's children, right? You're one of the...uh..."

"*I'm a Fork-based Alpha-level Artificial Intelligence. Are you my Uncle?*"

"Uh...technically, yes. It's...it's good to meet you, 00-EM."

A pause. Maybe it stopped watching him, Shinji thinks.

"*Uncle Shinji, how do I talk to a girl?"*

...

"As far as I can tell, the papers are blank," Kei says, tapping a pencil on the table as she waves off Kaworu, "I had my AT Field up when the blast hit, so I'm unharmed, Mom. It was a trap."

"*I see. Kihl set the trap for you?"*

"I think he set the trap for you," Kei responds, staring at the speaker phone, her hands tented in front of her mouth, "I was a late addition, remember? Kihl most likely had this set up as your 'inheritance' so you would be killed by the blast. He seems the type to do that. Most of his notes have been interesting, but I got a peak on the ones in the wall safe before they vaporized. They were blank and meaningless. It was definitely him pulling a fast one on us."

"There's more," Kaworu says, leaning over the chair as Kei gives him an irritated, but warm, glance, "Kihl was many things, and methodical was one of them. I can't tell you the details over the phone, though. I think we have a larger conspiracy at work. Can you send someone over the Germany?"

"*I sent Inspector Kaji over when I heard about the bomb, Kaworu. He'll be there tomorrow.*"

...

A groan, and Shinji stirs back to consciousness. He spent an hour trying to deflect questions about how to talk to girls. For some reason, this seems to be his lot in life, educating poorly socialized superhumans on how to score.

He opens his eyes. The cat stares back. Looking up, seven sets of red eyes stare down at him. Glancing down, four more sets of mechanical red eyes stare from the foot of his bed.

"Hi there," Rei says, "Big Brother."

"*Hi Aunt Rei!*"

The four children-in-mechanical-bodies look up, squealing.

"*Hi 00-EM!*" they yells, "*Where are you?*"

"*I'm in the closet!*"

The one with the 2 on her chest, Duae, pouts.

"*No, no, I mean that I've found myself an awesome new body! Aunt Rei even put in mechanical stuff and computer chips so I can download into it! It's great! Watch me!*"

The closet door shakes, bends outward, and explodes into a hail of splinters as two massive green arms burst outward, the massive form lurching forward as two red eyes glow from underneath the bird skull mask.

"This is great! It's tall and its big and strong! This is a great body, Aunt Rei!"

The four Reego clap their hands together and squeal. The Ree clap their hands together, and emit another sound, which would later be classified as a 'Reegasm' but that is not important now, because the loudest sound, as the Keiwaru-in-the-taxidermy'd body of the Sachielim begins lurching across the room, is Shinji's womanly,

terrified scream.

"*Lookit me! I'm the Alpha Male! I'M THE ALPHA MALE!*"

Shinji kicks off the bed, to make a dead run for it. A bad idea, as that disturbs the cat, which hisses before launching himself at Shinji's face once more. Screaming, the cat a spinning ball of pain around his head, he falls off the bed, stumbling around as the Ree step out of the way and Zyuu begins taking bets for who will win, Brother or Cat.

Which is when the Sachielim reaches out and grabs the cat by the head, pulling it off as it continues hissing and scratching, his other hand reaching out and grabbing Shinji by the head.

"*I'm really sorry, Uncle Shinji, but I can't control this body too well just yet. It's arms are too long and the commands seem different from the normal Lil'Shinji body NERV puts me into and oh no he's loose-*"

Which is when Merrill shakes loose of the hand, and launches himself, Claws first, at the Sachielim's face. Which is when another voice joins in to the screams.

Chapter 89: Suggestive Title is Suggestive

The slight whirring in her gears is the main thing that gives away her nature. Sitting on the couch, legs curled up under her, the black haired, blue eyed girl flips through the book. She can simply download the information contained within, but she revels in the feeling of paper against the neural sensors in her fingertips. It's the sensation, not the act, which gets her attention.

The door to the bedroom opens, and Ichi Ikari looks up from her book to see Shinji stumble out, still in his sweat pants and t shirt.

"Hey," he says, "When'd you get here?"

"Mom cleared me this morning," Ichi explains, "They're at NERV, by the way. So we've got the day off, and I can practice for Dad."

He squints, looking at the book.

"Nerve clusters?"

"Dad's idea," she says, "You know. Soft targets. Eyes, nose, knees, elbows. Work on my ass kicking, and when I get old enough to drink we can go start a bar brawl."

"Uh huh."

"Rei and the Ree are there, to," Ichi responds, "And Rei said she was real sorry about the whole you know, getting attacked by a chunk of an Angel thing. Said she restrained it and put it back in her closet."

"Uh huh."

"Since you passed out and wet yourself. Then Zyuu helped change you. Looked like you had a fun morning."

He grumbles, walking past her and into the kitchen. Opening the fridge, he takes out a tupperware container filled with food, opening it to put it in the microwave. Which is when he feels the gazes on him, and looks down to see four sets of red eyes staring at him. The Reego, in their labeled Lil'Rei avatar bodies, smile as he looks down.

"*Uncle Shinji Uncle Shinji!*" they squeal.

He blinks.

"*Play with us!*"

He blinks again. He turns to Ichi, still engrossed in her book, and back to his synthetic nieces.

"Oh...kay. What game do you want to play?"

"*Wolf Pack! We count to twenty and you hide! And then we chase you!*"

He scratches his head, and shrugs.

"Okay. So...I hide, you seek?"

They nod.

"Okay," he says, and grins, "Sounds fun. I'll hide. Start counting!"

"*One...*"

He runs out, hiding in the bathroom as the Reego count.

"*Eight...*"

Ichi raises an eyebrow as one of the closets open. Eight more Lil'Rei avatar bodies walk out, eyes lighting up as the Reego take control of them.

"*Fifteen...*"

Ichi shakes her head, turning back to her back as the girls hit twenty, listening to Shinji as he jokingly states that the girls will never find him in the bathroom. Which is when they girls find him in the bathroom. And then all twelve Lil'Rei Avatars jump him and begin biting, dragging him down like a deer.

"Yeah, six is a bad age for developing empathy," Ichi says, "You poor bastard."

Silence, as the girls release their hold on Shinji's limbs. There is a scraping sound in the bathroom, as Shinji regenerates and tries to persuade his nieces that this is not a good game. His reply comes in twelve digital voices.

"*One...*"

Ichi looks up as Shinji runs out, acrossing the living room, throwing on his sneakers and running out the door. Twenty seconds later,

twelve chibi reis run out in pursuit.

Chapter 89: Suggestive Title is Suggestive

"Less than a minute from arrival to the Angel's destruction," Yui says, hands braced on the holographic table, flanked by Kyoko and Misato as they watch the 3D replay of the battle with Galgaliel, "Evangelion Mark-09. It was constructed in NERV-Berlin without any input from us, and has no pilot."

"All the information your father and Kei have sent us point to it being operated by a modified Dummy Plug," Kyoko continues, tenting her hands, sitting in the chair and watching the battle replay yet again, "Yet when it first activated, it went berserk and had to be put down by the Nine, the Mark-06, and 04a. Which means they've modified it from the blueprints."

"Which also calls into question what the 'Mark' Evas are," Akagi finishes, arms folded, brow furrowed and knit, "The Old Men aren't telling us something. Have you checked the design notes on the Mark-06?"

The other two shake their heads.

"That's because there aren't any," Akagi responds, "It was, according to records, constructed on NERV-Luna at Trafalgar Base, but there's no records of the construction process. I can understand it being classified, but I has Naok00 pay a visit to the MAGI systems at Berlin and she couldn't find any record."

She tents her fingers, tapping them against themselves as she leans back in her chair.

"Look at it this way," she continues, "An Evangelion costs huge amounts of time, money, and resources. The construction of a single Evangelion can bankrupt a country. Unit-00's construction took six years. Unit-02 was in construction from 2002 to 2009, and was undergoing constant tests until 2014. Yet the Mark-06 and the Mark-09 show up without any record or prior testing and are perfectly capable of entering combat."

She taps out a cigarette, lighting it.

"I told Kaji to investigate," Ritsuko explains, "We're not being told

something."

"It points to Kihl, I'm sure of it," Yui seethes, "He tried to assassinate Kei. It was a thermite charge combined with a fuel air mixture. It blasted out a floor and Kei threw up an AT Field to avoid getting incinerated. Most likely, Kihl intended that for *me* instead, and just threw Kei into his will to screw with us."

"I'm sure the children who's bake sales Chairman Kihl hosted would be disappointed to hear of such actions," Kyoko says with a smirk, "So that is two mysteries we must solve: The true circumstances of the Mark series, and the reason Kihl attempted to murder miss Ayanami from beyond the grave. Not a bad series of tasks at all."

.

It floats down the hall, a faint whistling song resembling a cat's trill marking its passage. From a distance, those in NERV exposed to such sounds shrug it off, chalking it up to Lilly getting out of Sheol once again, which itself isn't a bad thing. The softball-sized Lelielim is curious, but not destructive, save for her visits to the arboretum and her borrowing of several honeybees.

It is on closer inspection that they realize the shape floating down the corridor is not Lilly.

It is a diamond, its shiny metallic surface a faint salmon pink, trilling a sad song as it floats down the corridor. As it passes by, there is a sound. It turns, one corner pointing towards Satsuki Aoi as the junior bridge technician quickly gathers the dropped charts from the floor.

Light plays over the surface of the prism. It gathers at a point, the shell of the miniature Ramiel breaking, forming into a lance, upon the tip of which the beam lancing out and strikes Satsuki's forehead. It stays there, a single red dot, the angry pink lance pointed at her and beaming its ineffectual laser beam at her.

And satisfied that the Lilim is suitably rebuked, the Ramielim reforms into the prism and continues floating.

"Oh...kay," Aoi says, "Um...alarms, anyone? Who wants to hit them?"

..

Kensuke Aida is not difficult to track. Despite his exposure to the Ree, he lacks the superhuman abilities of the Lilithian Nephilim. His ability to navigate ductwork often ends with him being stuck at an intersection. His attempts to jump people often end with sore muscles and sprained joints.

Still, it is his outlook which marks him as a friend of the Ree. It is that, that lets Zyuu track him, as she hops from treetop to treetop, unseen by him. She is not Siyon. She does not have the ability to blend in and become invisible in plain sight, but she is stealthy. All of them are.

It's just whether or not they want people to find them.

Leaping from branch to branch, Zyuu follows him. She watches as he walks into the small house on the outskirts of Tokyo-3, in the suburban areas of the Fortress City. It is small, one story, a ramp leading up to the front door next to stairs. She knows his file. Father was a veteran in the Impact Wars. Nerve damage shortly after Kensuke was born. He has his good days when he is partially mobile. Bad days when he is barely able to speak.

Tapping her PDA, she hacks the feed on the bugs planted inside the house by Section 2.

"*...to help Dad. I talked with Miss Katsuragi about it. If I do this for NERV, they'll help him."*

.o.

"Evangelion Mark-08 nears completion," Katsuhito says, hands folded behind him as he paces the expanse of the room, the spotlight following him as the other eleven monoliths of the SEELE council remain passive in their observation, "From what preliminary tests tell us, it will outpace the abilities of the previous generation. It is a True Evangelion in all forms, a weapon that can repel ADAM Himself."

"*And we are going to hand this weapon to Ikari?"* SEELE-07 asks, "*As much as you may trust your daughter, Chairman, Ikari is as duplicitous as Kihl and more concerned with their clan than with the fate of humanity."*

Hypocrisy as he ever heard it, Katsuhito thinks with a sad smile.

Standing up straighter, he smirks.

"Indeed. The Mark-08, like the Mark-09, will remain within the purview of SEELE through NERV-Luna. Our first test will be in one week. The pilot has already been chosen."

.oo.

The tree outside the school is her usual haunt, as she sits cross legged underneath it, enjoying the shade against the unseasonal heat and types away at her laptop. Mother sent her over more synch test results, now that Uri is getting his ratio higher and higher up. Nothing like what he had against Tamiel, but still, the results are promising.

She purses her lips. Scrunches her forehead.

She stayed in Mari's bedroom, last night. Lots of books on the bookshelf. Lots of things, like little trinkets and souvenirs from Germany. The clothes she had filled up an entire dresser and then the closet, and even though her father offered to put the stuff in storage, Asuka was fine living out of her suitcase.

The knapsack drops next to her, and she looks up just in time to see Mana plop down next to her under the shade.

"Hey," she says, "Been a while. I mean, since we talked."

Asuka blinks, staring at Mana. It has, she thinks. Well, since Mana tried to steal her boyfriend, and that whole fight thing between them. True, they haven't talked much. And Asuka still can't think of anything to say, so she-

"I found out my parents are dead," Mana says.

She sits down next to Asuka, legs out, hands folded on her lap. Her face like a mask, her jaw set.

"Kaji's been looking into legal channels," she continues, "He didn't tell me, but he's looking to adopt me. So, he was trying to find out about any living family. Found out my folks died in a bomb blast a yeah after I got sold. He sat me down and gave me the news. I mean, I figured Iruel'd use that to f_ with my mind, so I figured they'd still be breathing if anything."

She can see the wetness in Mana's eyes. She says nothing, her hands still hovering over her keyboard.

"I mean, they sold me," Mana says, "They needed to f_ing eat and I was the only thing they could barter with. I mean, it's not like I hated them, it's just...I don't remember enough about them to hate them. Y'know?"

A snort, and Mana wipes her nose, running her sleeve over her eyes.

"Anyway, that's what I got," she says, "Kaji's gone over to Germany to help out Kei. Uri's busy with Shinji's cousin and we were never good and close. So that's kinda leaving just you 'til Legs gets out of the hospital."

She pats Asuka on the shoulder, climbing to her feet.

And without another word, she walks away.

.o.o.

He's come to the conclusion that he needs to make the most of his twenty seconds between periods of vicious mauling. That is the most likely best idea, he muses, hiding in a tree on the outskirts. He wonders where Section 2 is, but they're probably everywhere, terrified of his nieces as they stalk him. The second time, he thought he ran far enough. They trapped him, behaving like a wolf pack, leading him into a trap where they dragged him down and repeatedly bit him.

Then the third time, where he dug a hole in the ground. It was rather impressive, managing to dig a six foot deep hole in less than twenty seconds, and another advantage of his Nephilim biology.

Then they found the hole and piled in.

That hurt.

It's been five minutes, Shinji thinks. He hides in a tree this time, straddling a branch at the top of the pine, at least a good thirty meters off the ground. Hopefully they can't find him, as they go around the forest, growling like tiny chainsaws, some walking on all fours and sniffing the air.

Then Shinji's phone rings. Grabbing it, he quickly mutes it, opening it.

"*What."*

"*Hi, Uncle Shinji,*" 00-EM says, voice squeaky, girlish over the receiver, "*Can I ask you some questions?"*

"Um...now is not the best time," he whispers, "I seem to have a...problem...with your...uh..."

"*Don't worry. I've already altered their sensors. Now they're more interested in how Israfim are supposed to taste like bacon."*

Shinji looks down. The twelve girls converge on an Israfim. Shinji watches, jaw dropping open at the sounds of ripping and tearing.

"*Well, I haven't been able to talk to Father-Entity, but Mother does say that you're really good at being masculine. Can you give me advice? I don't want to always be mistaken for a girl."*

"From what I remember, I think my uncle might be a better guy to ask..."

"*Una tells me it's because I'm really pretty. But I noticed that we have the same facial features, Uncle Shinji.*"

"That's because I look like my Mom, just like yours," he responds, "I...well, I guess it could be worse. You could look like my Dad, and then you'd have a really creepy beard."

"*But they always call me the Staff Chick. And I'm not a chick, I'm a boy! Why can't I be really manly and awesome like you?"*

He blinks.

"Like me?"

"*Yeah! You even have a web page about you on the internet with all sorts of facts about you. Is it true the AT Field isn't supposed to keep the Evas out, but you in?"*

"I...uh...I dunno, that's really Mom's area of expertise..."

"*Is it true you fought the Commander and the President of the United States to a standstill and were the last man standing?"*

"That's not really true," he responds, "I wasn't even in that fight."

"Oh," 00-EM says, voice dropping, "*So it isn't true that you faced down*

Zeruel outside of your Evangelion?"

"Okay, that happened."

"*AWESOME!"*

Shinji sighs, palming his face. The Reego have cornered another Israfim. A growl, and he looks up, to find Merrill sitting on the branch in front of him, waving his long, bushy tail.

"How did he get here?" Shinji asks, "How did he sneak up on us?"

"*That is no ordinary cat, Uncle Shinji! We have to run!"*

...

"We made a deal with the Aida boy," Gendo explains, hands tented in front of his face as Pieter paces in front of the desk, the lights of the Mausoleum dim over the two, backlit by the Geofront's filtered light, "He asked for very little. Which is surprising, as our offer was rather...permitting to his interests."

"Aida's foaming at the mouth to work with NERV," Pieter responds, tapping his foot as the door opens to allow Yui entry, "I know the type. He's a military nerd who idolized anyone who can pilot a giant robot. It made sense that he'd take the offer."

"I still think we should have gone to Suzuhara," Yui interrupts, "But you're right, Aida's a better choice. Kaji will arrive in Berlin within the hour. We'll have our mole in Berlin and we have our second Agent reporting in from the Second Branch."

Gendo nods.

"Good," he says, "Give the old man my regards. We should..."

It phases up through the floor. The small, football sized Ramielim, phases in through the floor, floating up to Pieter's eye level as the three scientists/administration personnel stare at it.

"What the f-"

The prism spins out into a ring, floating over and planting itself on

Yui's head, cooing a soft tinkle through the air as it forms into a tiara, crystal spires rising as it takes the form of a pink, crystal crown.

"Well, I guess it's official," Pieter says with a shrug, "That or it's so obvious the Angels know who's running NERV."

"Shut up," Yui says, pinching the bridge of her nose, "Right, are we all getting the same obvious conclusion on what this is?"

She doesn't wait for a reply. Instead, she turns and walks out, walking out of the office, sneakers clapping against the metal floor as she passes by technicians, staring at the newly-crowned Yui as she walks into the elevator and presses the floor button for the isolation infirmary.

The door opens, and Yui enters, walking past the waiting area as passive sensors notice her, misting the air with sterilization sprays as she walks in.

Mari looks up from the book, still in the bed, IV tubes attached to each arm, dressed in a blue hospital gown, and raises an eyebrow as she sees the crown upon Yui's head.

"So...ceremony? Uniform?"

"It's a Ramielim," Yui says, "It just showed up in the Commander's office."

"Huh."

"Yes, 'huh,'" Yui says, folding her arms, "Mari, I think you created a backup body when you took that hit from Tamiel. This is obviously the same sort of thing as Junior or the Ree's pet Shamselim. Can you possibly control it or-"

A red light hits the crown. Trilling, the crown detaches, rising and reforming into its diamond shape, turning with Yui to see Maya in the entrance, holding the laser pointer at the ramielim.

"Maya, why do you have a laser pointer?"

"I babysit Mr. Fluffles," Maya says, as the Ramielim floats back over to Mari, "I figured if it uses a laser pointer to show hostility it-"

And then the Ramielim liquifies, and retreats into Mari's hand.

"Huh," Mari says, "That's new."

...

He runs. The cell phone gives him directions, to run in, to avoid the horde chasing him. It was bad enough when they thought they were wolves. Then the world possible thing happened. The cat banded them under his control, and now they are *hunting* him.

A screech, and he rolls out of the way as a Reego drops from on high, claws first with a hiss. Shinji ducks, rolls, and takes off in a run, holding the cell phone up to his ear.

"Do something!" he screams, "Can't you take control of a laser or a tank or something?"

"*Nothing nearby! And if I occupy something, the cat will see me!"*

"Then get in *tank!* It's a *cat!*"

"*But that cat is really mean and LOOK OUT!"*

A Reego drops from on high, landing on Shinji's face. Arms and legs wrapped around his head like a blue and white Facehugger, he drops, grabbing at the girl as she squeezes, dropping the phone on the grass as the other Reego drop out of the trees.

He pries the girl off, sitting up to find the other eleven Reego assembled before him. Gracefully, Merrill drops in front of them, sitting on his haunches as he waves his tail.

"*That was awesome!"* Tres shouts, "*Unca Shinji, can we take Merrill back to Australia with us? He's like the greatest hunter ever!"*

"Girls! Aunt Ichi wants to talk with you!"

The Reego stand up, smile, and run back in the direction of the apartment building. Merrill cocks his head, rises, and begins to leisurely trot after them.

Turning, he finds a pale face and blue hair staring at him with red eyes. He can tell his sisters apart, but it is the french maid uniform that gives her away.

"Zyuu?"

"Come with me," she says, "I think Kensuke just volunteered to be an

Eva pilot."

...

Yui sighs, watching lines of code and meaningless numbers scroll across the screen. That's the way Naok00 sets up the connections, after all, between her and their secret contact in the Second Branch, over in Berlin.

"Is he on, yet?"

She cocks her head. Kyoko closes the door to Yui's office, walking in as the door automatically locks.

"Naok00's setting up the connection," Yui says, "Be patient, we just need to-"

"**I am online, Doctor Ikari."**

Both women start at the sound of the deep, baritone voice. It is a mechanical voice, their contact lacking a mouth after all. But it is its chosen method of communication. Its chosen method of speaking.

"Hello, Evangelion Mark-06," Yui says, tenting her fingers as the screen folds out to the single line that vibrates at every word the contact says, "How are you, today?"

"**I am feeling well, Doctor Ikari. Thank you for asking. What information can I send to you?"**

"We're trying to find out more about the Mark-08 and the Mark-09. Everything is unavailable, and as head of Project E, I need to know what resources we have."

"**A logical request, Doctor Ikari. However, I lack any access to the schematics of myself, the Mark-08, or the Mark-09."**

"Very well. Can you tell me why the Mark-09 has no pilot?"

"**The Mark-09 does not require a pilot, Doctor Ikari. It is controlled directly by the Core."**

Yui purses her lips. Something like the theoretical Dummy Plug, then, she thinks.

"Okay," she says, as Kyoko nods, "Is the Mark-08 controlled in a similar way?"

"**No. The Mark-08 has a pilot. The pilot was recently chosen. Shall I send you the data?"**

"Yes, please."

...

"Okay, you're making little sense even for you," Shinji says, dragged along by his french maid-suited sister as they exit the woods to the outskirts of Tokyo-3, "What do you mean, Kensuke's a pilot?"

"Kensuke told his mother he took a job for NERV," Zyuu responds.

Her voice has a tremble to it. Less french, more frantic, Shinji notes, as she continues dragging him along. If not for his nephilim physiology, there's a good chance she could have yanked his arm out of his socket with the force she's pulling with.

"You're worried about him."

She nods. Her cheeks turn red.

"Oh," Shinji says, "Well...oh. Let me guess. You like him?"

She nods again.

"Does that mean you're going to stop that creepy hitting on me?"

To this, Zyuu shrugs.

"Well, too much to ask for, I guess," he sighs, "Come one. Where's Kensuke's house?"

She continues leading him onward, and Shinji sighs at the lot of his life. Now it seems that it is not just the distantly related superhumans he has to give relationship advice to, but his own sisters as well.

Maybe he should call Mom about this. But it is at that point that he realizes he dropped his phone when he was being hunted by the Reego and their feline overlord.

"So, did you ever meet Merrill?"

"Yep," Zyuu responds, "Little Mommy would rotate us out at the beginning. Merrill would be there to greet us. He could tell us apart."

"Despite you being identical."

"Uh huh. Merrill's very wise."

"For a cat."

No answer to that statement from her. Shinji sighs as she leads him to the one story house. At least tomorrow he'll be cleared to go back to school and the madness of his life will each a sort of equilibrium again. Or not, depending on how batshit this gets.

He walks past Zyuu and knocks on the door, tapping his feet, looking down on his grass stained, partially shredded pants as Zyuu folds her hands at her waist, staring straight past Shinji.

The door opens. Kensuke adjusts his glasses, looking at the two.

"Okay," Shinji says, before Kensuke can speak, "Ken, were you chosen as the Eighth Child?"

Kensuke cocks an eyebrow.

"No."

Zyuu blinks, lolling back and forth on her heels.

"But...you said you were going to work for NERV," Zyuu says, "Doesn't that mean you're going to pilot an Eva?"

"No," Kensuke says, scratching his head, "Um...huh, I thought we closed all the vents but no, I'm not working as a pilot. NERV asked me to do some camera work for a documentary they're doing on the Evas, and I asked them to get my Dad into this experimental nerve treatment instead of paying me."

Throwing up his hands, Shinji groans. It is a groan of relief, born of the events of the day, having come to an end and with all his limbs intact.

"Great!" he says, "Now I just have to find my way back to *Mom's apartment* without being *jumped by my nieces!* Oh, wait. Let me try something."

He turns, walking in the direction of the apartment building, before

shouting out something along the lines of 'I can see you.' The black car pulls up next to him, turning the corner, and Shinji, still ranting and yelling, climbs into the back seat as Section 2 drives him back home.

"Did he have a bad day?" Kensuke asks.

"Well, the girls wanted to play with their Uncle," Zyuu says, and turns back to him, "If...NERV asked you to pilot for your father, would you?"

He shrugs.

"I guess," he says, "I mean...I used to think piloting a giant robot'd be great. But...that was a while ago. If I had to, I would. If it meant Mom and Dad would be safe."

"I see," Zyuu says, and smiles, a faint upturning of her lips, "That's...good. I was worried that you might pilot. It is very dangerous."

He nods, and turns to the sound of someone calling.

"Yeah, that's my Dad," he says, "Hey, Zyuu, do you want to meet..."

He turns. She's already gone.

...

"The Mark-08 will be completed shortly," Katsuhito says, pacing the monoliths, "I trust you have reviewed my choice of pilot. Have we reached a consensus?"

"*Your choice is recognized, Chairman,*" SEELE-07 says, "*But can we ensure the loyalty of the pilot to the Scenario? Is it wise to put the most powerful Evangelion yet to be built in the hands of one of Ikari's allies?"*

Katsuhito smiles. Ah, yes. One of the ones easiest to fool, easiest to manipulate.

"I assure the Committee that loyalty will not be an issue," he says, "And more importantly, it behooves us to use our resources properly. She has several Angel kills to her credit and has shown herself to be intelligent and adaptable. The Second Child will pilot the Mark-08."

Chapter 90: Shipping War

Initiating MAGI Virtual Server.

Setting: JA-Tan's Special Tea Room

Five pink cups of pink tea sit on the pink, table cloth covered table.

"So," Jet Alone's avatar says, sitting at the coffee table and sipping tea as she looks down to her guests, "You want to get your parents together, is that right?"

"Yeah!" Una says, "Our Momma and Daddy should be happy together! That's how it's supposed to be!"

"So we've gotta murder the hypotenuse," Duae shouts, "And by 'murder' I mean 'scare' and by 'scare' I mean 'may have to stab!'"

"So we've gotta get our Momma and Daddy together!" Tres adds, "'Cause 00-EM's Momma and Daddy are together and ours aren't and that ain't fair!"

"So we're gonna get our *ROMANCE* on!" Ivy yells, pumping her fist in the air, "For *GREAT JUSTICE!"*

...

A small burp, and a fist slams against his chest twice. Tapping the table, Pieter looks up, scratches his nose, and looks across the lunch table to his fiance/ex-wife.

"I'm sorry, did you feel that?" Pieter asks, "Kinda felt like...I dunno."

"Like a cold hand gripping your heart?" Kyoko asks.

"Yep."

"It's the chili. They never get it right," she responds, "Anyway, I wanted your opinion on something. I think if we follow Asuka and Shinji's example, we can increase Uri's synch ratio by pairing him with another pilot."

He blanches.

"You're not going to try to pair up Shinji and Uri again, are you?"

"Of course not," Kyoko says, giving him that stare that seems to act as a substitute for a knee to the crotch, "I want to pair him with Rei."

Chapter 90: Shipping War

Twitching, twiddling his fingers, Shinji looks across the space between the two couches. He sits in one. She sits in the other. She smiles, sweetly, unaware of the cold terror that grips the pit of his stomach. The door to the apartment is closed. The words and warning ring in Shinji's ears.

"So," Ichi says, "What'd you want to talk about?"

"Sex."

Shinji winces. Did he just say that out loud? In front of his sister?

"Oh, you mean it's time for the Talk," Ichi says, face splitting with a grin with an audible whir, "*Awesome.* How'd Mom get you to do this?"

"It's my punishment for almost ending the world," Shinji sighs, "Okay. So, when a Man and a Woman really like each other-"

"He puts the wood in her."

Shinji blinks, staring at the girl. Did she just say that? Did his *little sister* just say that?

"What?"

"Well, I am kinda curious," Ichi says, cocking an eyebrow, tapping her fingers together, "What does that mean, exactly? I'm not sure what it means when they say that. Do you actually put wood inside her? Wouldn't that give her splinters?"

He chokes, mildly, sipping water as his mind whirrs on how to give the sex talk to the anthropomorphic robotic representation of his little sister. Who is in fact a genderless 60 meter tall cyborg.

"Well, okay," Shinji says, "Remember when Mom took us to the beach? And Uri and I got into a fight? About bedtimes?"

Ichi nods.

"It wasn't about bedtimes."

Ichi nods...and then her eyes go wide. Her mouth opens.

"Oooooooo. You put your dingaling in Asuka's hooha."

"What."

"Internet access," Ichi says, "So *that's* sex. I want *details."*

...

Sighing, Yui Ikari rubs her nose, sliding the glasses on as she stares at her monitor screen. Either the anti-glare screen she has on the monitor is slipping, she needs new glasses, or she actually just read that email from Zyuu about 'shipping' Rei. She doesn't want to know what 'shipping' is or what it entails, outside of the idea that as with anything involving her gaggle of daughters it will involve cover stories and misdirection.

"What is this I don't even..."

The list. The list of proper demands on what a potential Mate for Rei entails. She sees the list but she is not sure what she is reading. Why does Hatchi demand the capture of *Daniel Craig* for brainwashing?

Who is that? Well, not like she watches those many movies.

"Why does Nana want...no, no. Wait. That's Nana. Of course she would want that. I swear, it's like that time Kei lead the breakout from Sheol. Demands, demands, demands, and in all honesty Iti I see what you're doing there, putting a sensible proposal for seed diversity with Kiko trying to breed Teletubbies..."

Yui sighs, closing the email and rubbing the bridge of her nose.

Although, they do have a point. They have a very good point. Most of her mistakes these past few weeks have been all following that old phrase about the road to Hell and good intentions. What's one more?

"Odd," she says, "Hm..."

She snaps her fingers, and smiles, picking up her phone and dialing in the number. A familiar reply of someone she hasn't been terribly familiar with.

"Yes? Miss Kirishima? It's Doctor Ikari. I'd like you to come up to my office..."

...

The access hatch gives way, the code simulated with a wave of her glowing, orange omnitool. The illumination from her plug suit's built in lantern cuts through the dust of the long abandoned laboratory, and she coughs as she enters, climbing down the ladder and landing in front of the bolted doors.

"We're in Sheol."

"Yeah. Didn't know I had the clearance for this."

Asuka turns, the other girl walking up next to her. Her plug suit's light, set at the center of her chest, blinks infrequently in the near darkness.

"It's locked," Mana says, "Lemme."

Mana reaches out, grabbing the bolts on the front door and squeezing, crunching the metal before she tears them off. A shove, and the door opens, the room in front of them remaining dark until Asuka reaches out, the orange light of her omnitool illuminating the light switch that she flicks.

"So," Mana says, "This is where they made Rei?"

"P-pretty much," Asuka says, "This is Naoko Akagi's lab. Naok00?"

Silence. No answer.

"Weird," Mana says, "I thought Skynet was hooked up all over the base."

Asuka blinks looking at her.

"Reference," Mana says, "So this place is disconnected from the MAGI? Is that even possible?"

"Dr. Ikari said so," Asuka responds, pulling the dust cloth off one of the tables to find it empty, "Th-thats how she figured out where Dr. Akagi was, when she found Rei. It was the only part of the base n-not connected with the MAGI."

"Makes sense. Stupid place to hide."

"She was crazy," Asuka sighs, pulling off another dust curtain, the monitor screen of a disconnected computer left on the desk, the CPU long gone, "She may have l-left something. Something about Rei."

"Uh huh."

Mana scratches her head.

"So...why'd you bring me? Where's Rei?"

"Rei's...busy."

...

The grate gives way, and two blue haired heads, one of which has green highlights, peak in before both girls drop into the laboratory on the far east end of the Geofront.

Iti and Rei enter Iti's not-at-all-secret-and-actually-on-the-resource-listing-spreadsheet laboratory, where several lights shine down on arranged rows of seedlings and insect colonies. There are four tables in the lab, four tables with meticulous care, water mist hovering over each one from the water sprays set underneath the lights, the entire lab a testament to order.

"So...welcome to my abode," Iti says, hopping down and walking across the swept, tiled floors to the lit enclosure of several blue and silver flowers, "This is my currant project." She stops, pauses, and clears her throat. "Current."

Rei nods, following her sister to one of the tables, watching as Iti meticulously pulls a cup out of the bunch on the table, bringing over the blue and silver flower which she carefully balances between her hands.

"These showed up after the Angel at the school was destroyed," Iti says, "I think it's connected. These are a new bread of flower."

Rei nods.

"Okay," she says, "What if you're wrong?"

Iti blinks, shrugs, and walks back to the table.

"If I am, I run the experiment again," she responds, "No one's right the first time with science."

"Or SCIENCE."

Iti sighs, fitting the cup back in.

"I miss Kei, to," Iti says, "Too. But in all honesty, Kei wasn't good at science. I like things orderly. Systems. Growth. She wanted to be a scientist because Little Mommy is a scientist."

Rei nods, sighing.

"I know," she says, "I was just hopin' I could get a rivalry goin' with you. 'Cause I've been all stagnant and I haven't gotten anything really fun to do since Kei left for Berlin."

Iti shrugs.

"Kei liked to argue. I don't. I mess up words. Kei also had issues."

"Lotsa issues."

"She wanted to be babied. Always held onto Little Mommy's labcoat when she visited. Gigantic insecurities. Needs a hug. Or massage. Maybe Nana would be better for rivalry. Or Zyuu."

Iti turns back to her experiments, walking over to the fly enclosure.

"Sorry if I tricked you," Rei sighs.

"Not a problem. Like spending time with you. Have experiments to run."

Rei nods, skipping over to the table.

"So," Rei says, "What is that?"

Iti reaches it, catching one of the flies. A fly with a blue and silver carapace, translucent green wings flapping ineffectively, its red, multifaceted eyes locking on Iti.

"Something new."

...

"So, Ichi, when a man and a woman really like each other...uh...they sort of well kind of have to well not really because its really not responsible and you should wait until your married but Asuka and I were kind of influenced by Lilith and we ended up in bed together. But it wasn't the first time. Because we actually slept together a few times, but never had sex before that."

Ichi nods.

"Okay," she says, "So when'd you two make the bucking bronco?"

"What."

"When'd you put in the Lance?"

"What."

"When'd you hit 400%? Well, you hit 400% with me, but that was scary for me since you were all angry and then I retreated into my Core for a couple of weeks. That doesn't mean we had sex, did we? Because if we did, then a) that's disgusting, and b) I'm going to rub that into Zyuu's face."

"NO!" Shinji says, and bites his lip, finding a spot on the ceiling to stare at, "I mean, no. What we did was not sex. I'm not even sure what the *Hell* we did, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't sex. Sex usually doesn't end up with me a Nephilim and you aging up *six years.* I think."

...

The blinds of the window are drawn back, and Mana stares through the window into the room beyond. It is the lake of LCL, the white giant nailed at the center, forming islands of spongy white, legs drawn up and arms limp and shriveled in the orange liquid. The Lance, still dug deep into it, is propped up at an angle, the remains of the red cross floating around her.

"Nice view," she says, "No wonder Dr. Akagi's mom went fucknuts. I see this everyday, I'm pretty sure I'd lose it, too."

"She needed to be close," Asuka responds, clearing off another table, "M-makes sense. The Ree are m-made from Lilith, so she'd n-need access to Lilith without going through official channels."

"Yeah, the sanity loss's an added bonus."

Asuka nods, walking over to the dust cloth covered swivel chair, pulling off the cloth and sitting at the once used computer desk.

"But that's not why I'm here, is it?" Mana asks, "I mean, you could do this yourself, or get one of the Ree to tag along. Dr. Ikari wanted me to come down here with you. And why's that?"

Asuka sighs, leaning against the table.

"D-do you need to ask?"

...

Two albino girls in tutus. As Rei has found out, just because you're a superhuman doesn't mean you don't have to stretch.

She found Hatchi, next. Hatchi, in her time since she was released from Sheol, had decided to take up hobbies. But that was the *thing* about Hatchi, because she liked doing new *things*. In this case, the *thing* was Ballet, and Rei went with her to a dance studio she found during a breakout when she was eight.

Unfortunately, Rei's attempt to start a rivalry with her ended with her realizing she didn't *like* ballet. And also wasn't good at it, because focusing on things outside of Eva was never her strong point, which she found when she tried to do a dance with Hatchi and tripped on her own feet before face planting on the stage.

"Well, it's kinda like this," Hatchi says, sitting at the side of the gym with Rei as the rest of the class, a mix of teens and small children, continue their practice, "I had lotsa time when we were all trapped in the...placecauseSection2doesn'tlikeussayingit and I had a lot of time to practice, so I've gotten really good! Almost as good as you are with Eva!"

Rei blinks. So, she thinks, if Hatchi's been regularly practicing this in the MAGI...

"So if you wanted to be as good as me, you'd haveta practice...oh...two hours a day for the next five years!"

Hatchi claps her hands together and squeals.

"That's gonna be sooo~ooo much fun!"

Rei's shoulders slump. This is harder than it looks. It's one thing to want a sibling rivalry, but another to want one where she'd be that far behind. But, she has to take care of her sisters. She was told to be responsible.

And Responsible Rei is Responsible.

"Miss Ayanami?"

She looks up. A gaggle of eight year old girls, whom Rei would squeal about being adorable and stuff if she wasn't sore all over, have gathered in front of the two, with all of them holding small little notebooks.

"Hatchi's told us all about you and how you're awesome and stuff," the lead girl, an eight year old in a white tutu with brown pigtails, says, "Can we have your autograph?"

...

"So," Shinji says, "That's sex."

Mouth pursed, Ichi stares at him, hands folded in her lap and eyes wide. He honestly can't believe he just told her all that. Well, he honestly thought she would know, if there was some sort of bleed-back between the mind of the pilot and the mind of the Eva, and he definitely was piloting Eva after he and Asuka...did things.

Things which he just explained, in as innocent a method as possible, to his little sister.

Slash Eva.

Yeah.

"So," she says, "When do I get to do that?"

"Never," Shinji responds, clapping his hands, "Oh, wait! Let's ask

Mom!"

He mimes a phone in his hand, loudly beeping as he imitates pressing numbers.

"Hi, Mom! Ichi wants to have sex. What do you say? Oh, okay. So, I'm *disowned.* And Section 2's on its way to *kill me?* Thanks, Mom."

He puts away the 'phone,' folding his hands in his lap and staring at her.

"Is it a touchy subject?" Ichi asks.

"Ichi, Mom has cameras everywhere. She watched me and Asuka, and she was still pissed about it. Yes, it's amazingly hypocritical of her, but that's Mom. She has trouble accepting us acting like grownups, kind of because we're not grown up."

...

Next, Rei found Nana. In particular, she found Nana sitting in a cafe a half mile from the apartment she shares with all her sisters, with her hands forming a bridge in front of her face as she stares at the cup of hot chocolate in front of her. According to the barrista, she has been like this for the past half hour, staring at the sugary concoction, as they were under strict orders from NERV to not give her anything caffeinated, since she ordered it.

Taking a seat across from her, Rei folds her hands pursing her lips.

"Sooooo..."

"Bored now," Nana says.

And then the cup glows as the porcelain rises and begins to glow, through an ingenious device Nana had created and fitted onto the handle when no one was looking. Combining with the liquid, contained by Nana's AT Field, the cup lifts off the plate and achieves a solid state fusion, illuminating the cafe with a roar of sound that is only overshadowed by the girlish squeal coming from the lilithian nephilim staring straight into the heart of the briefly flickering sun.

As the light clears and the patrons begin to look up from their tables, Nana looks over to the barrista, raising a triumphant fist into the air.

"I'll have another!"

Which is just when the Section 2 agents reveal themselves from behind the fixtures, raining tranquilizer darts upon the patrons, barrista, and Nana, before picking up the excitable girl.

"Yeah, we're gonna have to talk to Ikari about her," one agent sighs, "That's the second cafe she's turned into a lab this week. Get Section 3 to open up the Ayanami Hush Fund again."

He sighs, checking his PDA.

"For f_s sake, she irradiated everything. What does she think a sun does? At least her AT Field was up so it's like she sunburned the place, and didn't kill everything."

"Well, technically some forms of fusion are aneutronic-"

The young, british Section 2 agent winces under the glare of his superior.

"But this one obviously wasn't," he corrects.

"I don't even know how she gets the stuff," the older agent mutters, staring at the burn mark covering the table, "I mean, seriously-"

"Well, one in every 64,000 atoms of hydrogen is naturally occuring Deuterium," the educated british agent continues, "She's probably getting the raw materials using tap water and a cunning centrifuge, meaning she-"

"For God's sake, Reynolds, I know you were a PhD student. We all know this. But this is less amusing and more along the lines that I need to see if one of the girls dragged you into a duct and gave you the Aida Special." The veteran blinks, removes his sunglasses, and rubs the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, get Section 1 on the horn. Tell them to get a decontamination team, shut the place down, and scrub everyone and everything. *Again.*"

He turns over to Rei, shrugging.

"Sorry about that, Miss Ayanami," he says, "But you're going to have to exit the facilities. We need to hose the place down. Again."

With that, they and the unconscious Nana exit, as the black van pulls up to be loaded with the unconscious and mildly irradiated civilians.

"Yeah," Rei sighs, "Iiiiii~ii'm gonna need a new plan."

...

"Well, that kindasucks," Ichi mutters, folding her arms, "You mean even though I'm a sixty meter tall war machine, I don't get all the rights that Mom and Dad have?"

"No," Shinji responds, "Because mentally, you're still twelve."

"Chronologically, I'm older than Earth."

"And the Ree are chronologically ten. We use your ego-image age in this family, young lady."

He winces, shakes his head and groans.

"God, I'm sounding like Mom," he mutters, "Okay. Okay. Let me try to put it this way. You're still very young. No matter how old your main body is...and I can't believe I said that...you're still, mentally, young. And you also have a lot of people who do care for you, and who don't want to see you get hurt."

Another groan. Shinji leans back and runs a hand through his hair, as Ichi shifts on her sofa and chews on her lip.

"Of course, you wouldn't just be asking about this out of the blue," he says, "Ichi...is there a boy you like?"

Ichi blushes. Which is when Shinji notices that it is rather odd that the robot body Ichi is inside apparently has blood to blush in the first place, and he wonders where his sisters got the blood for...wait. Don't wonder that, that is not a good thing to wonder.

"No, wait, let me guess," he says, "Is it Uri?"

...

Two girls sit in the abandoned, isolated lab. The cans of soda that Mana had in her bag are empty, on one of the tables next to them, as Asuka leans on the table and listens. That is all she can do now; listen, and try not to judge.

"Y'know, I never made it a secret that I liked Uri," Mana says, "I mean, face it. Your brother's hot."

"I d-don't look at Uri that way."

"Your loss. He's got a nice ass. Shame that's pretty much the only thing he's got going for him, 'cause he's kind of a jerk."

Asuka chuckles faintly, nodding.

"Well, I did like him," Mana says, "Then he upped and left after Mari died. Kinda obvious then that I was disappointed. I blow my own arm off, Mari dies, Uri runs off to Berlin to get his head together. And you know who the only person was that actually wanted to know what happened to me was?"

"Shinji."

"Yep."

Her knuckles wrap against the table. Silence hangs in the air.

"If it helps, I'm jealous of you two," she continues, "I mean, in a good way. You've got a good thing, and...well, I've got enough points going against me without trying to break up happy couples."

Asuka reaches out with a sigh, enclosing Mana's hand with her own.

"Don't w-worry," she says, "I forgave you long ago. I wouldn't b-be surprised if Rei set that all up just so we'd clear the air. She's like that."

Mana snorts, nodding, slapping her knees and standing. Sighing, she paces the room, walking in a circle along the perimeter as Asuka leans back. Stretching her arms above her head, Mana groans, turning around and staring at the window.

"So, this is where Rei got made," she mutters, "Gotta wonder why. What'd Ikari tell you?"

"Rei w-was supposed to be made as a pilot," Asuka responds, "An engineered pilot. They called it the Dummy Plug."

Mana nods, staring out the window...and smirks.

"Yeah," she says, "I mean, Akagi was smart, right? Crazy, but smart. She'd have to...I dunno, leave something here, right?"

"That's what we hoped, yes," Asuka sighs, "Why do you-"

Mana runs over, clenching her fist, and punches out the window. Asuka squeaks, the room shuddering as alarms inside the lab chime and the shutters above the window begin to close. Muttering to herself, Mana reaches through the shattered glass, her sleeve shredding as she reaches around and pulls, falling back as the blast plate drops and the room goes dark.

And laughing, she holds up a disc, crusted red from the exposure to the LCL.

"She hid it outside the window?" Asuka asks, grabbing the disc, "Of c-course."

"You want it, you have to climb the wall in Terminal Dogma or punch out the window. Smart but crazy."

...

Slow breaths. She pinches the bridge of her nose, looking up from the reports as the pulling at the back of her head makes her wince, closing her PDA as she turns from the report...colorfully and erroneously called so due to the volume and...stuff...in the text to the current guest of the main Hangar, where she is standing with the Commander, Pieter, Akagi, and Ibuki.

The jaw of the PROBE moves in time with the squeaky, child-like voice emanating from the speakers, as the little continues its ranting towards the Command Staff of NERV.

"*-and we were left alone! The least you could'vedone was check up on us or drop Daddy on Australia!"*

"I'm not sure how we would do that," Akagi sighs, "The launching of an Eva for an intercontinental trip would either be by a dedicated airlift or by loading it into an ICBM..."

The PROBE nods.

"Okay," Gendo says, "That explains why you had to leave when you...visited...during the Vegas incident. The fact of the matter is, we were having satellite trouble afterwards. Zeruel's descent to Earth took out a large portion of our satellite coverage, and the Angel also

damaged much of NERV, so we were unable to contact you."

"*'kay. Still kindasucks. We had to be all responsible and stuff or people were gonna die, and we're only seven. Well, I'm like, seven and a half and Ivy's six and everyone else's inbetween and now you're gonna have to throw us a birthday party to make up for it."*

"...right," Ritsuko sighs, "So...girls...can you explain to us what exactly happened in Australia? We're still going over the...odd...readings from the satellites, and we'd like your on-the-ground reports. From Una. Not Ivy."

The three Little Rei robots on the PROBE's shoulders look dejected. Then one's eyes flicker and the PROBE shifts, signaling the change in the controlling consciousness of the thankfully unarmed 20 meter tall robot.

"*Okeydoke it's storytime!*" Ivy says, clapping massive metal hands together, "*Soooo~ooo we were off doing stuff to stuff in Australia when the thingie happened and the stuff came out all over the place-*"

"Did she just use *stuff* three times in the same sentence?" Kyoko asks, jaw dropping.

"The second and third 'stuff' mean the same thing," Gendo responds, "Rei has the same vocal habits."

"*Aaa~and that's when the big crystal Angel thingy appeared-*"

"Which I would like to clarify was not Mari," Pieter adds.

The PROBE turns to him.

"*We knoo~ow. 'Cause she's still alive."*

Gendo closes his fist, a trembling smile on his face as proud tears leak from behind his glasses.

"So *proud* of the girls..."

Kyoko takes a step to the side away from him, wincing again at the migraine that is apparently caused by extensive exposure to the Reego.

"*-And that's when Tres taught the giant spiders how to read-"*

She rubs her temples, shaking her head. The throbbing is harder, and

she can see from the wincing on Akagi and Pieter's face that they're feeling the effects, to. Too. Dear Lord, the Reego are verbally *infecting* them.

But Maya is simply taking notes, wiping a tear from her eye. But then again, the girl babysat Rei, so she probably has already been broken.

"*And then the Angel was all I'M CHARGIN MAH LAZUR-*"

Pieter has started drooling. That is never a good sign.

...

Popping open the drive on the laptop, Asuka slides in the disc, Mana and Yui looking over her shoulder as the screen boots up.

"We went over every inch of her lab," Yui says, "And she hid that disc outside the window?"

"Yeah," Mana says, nodding, "Crazy enough to not be affected by the Sexytime aura, I guess."

The two women stare at Mana. She shrugs.

"I call it what it is."

The screen blinks, turning black as the disc loads up. Sealed in an airtight case, against the weathering of LCL and the ravages of time, the data loads, a cursor appearing on the black load screen before silently moving across it, revealing a single line of numbers and letters.

"What is that?" Mana asks.

"It's a...s-serial number," Asuka says, "That's...that's all that's on the disc. A serial number."

"Naoko left a clue," Yui says, and smirks, "The disc isn't her information. It's the first clue on where to find her notes."

Taking out her PDA, she begins filing through notes, turning back to the screen.

"Clever," she says, "I know that one. It's the serial number on the SDAT player I bought Shinji before he went to live with Tomoe and Alicia."

"Is it still there?"

Yui nods.

"They're packrats," she says, "Asuka, meet me at the motor pool. We're going on a road trip."

...

Siyon was...well, Siyon was busy hiding in ductwork and not able to talk or start a rivalry with her. Zyuu was too busy worrying 'bout Kensuke, so Rei finally had enough and grabbed the two of them and deposited them on the roof of the school so they could talk and 'stuff, but that still means she doesn't have a Rival.

Sighing, she takes a deep breath of the LCL as the carriage is lined up with the electrified railings, plates opening up to the surface 15 kilometers outside of Tokyo-3.

"*Rei, standby. We're sending Go-kun up to the surface. Proceed to walk to the waypoints in order."*

"'Kay."

The cradle shudders and rises, climbing along the tracks at speed, clearing armor layers and accelerating to its standard speed in less than a second...

Before stopping. It stops, shudders, the LCL around Rei taking the actual impact from the sudden deceleration. Which is when the core begins to glow and turns white...

...

"Odd," Pieter says, arms folded as he stares at the Big Screen, "Was it me, or did Rei sound...off?"

"She's a lilithian nephilim, Pieter," Kyoko sighs, "And from what Section 2 told me she's been interacting constantly with her sisters today for some unknown, possibly arcane reason. That she didn't smuggle a chainsaw into the Entry Plug is a boon to us all."

Pieter shudders. He read the manual. He read the classified protocols

regarding Rei, and has the cyanide capsule that is handed to all high level staff should Rei decide it is time to breed. Still, for all her...inhuman...aspects she is still quite human in how she acts to people, and while he hasn't spent much time around the Ikaris' daughter, he recognizes the effect she's had on his.

"So," he says, "What's next on the-"

The words are cut off when the Kyoko pitches forwards, holding her forehead, eyes blinking rapidly. Pieter responds instantly, grabbing her, helping her regain her footing as she clenches her eyes shut, grabbing at his arm to help support herself.

"The Hell..." Pieter asks.

"Talking to the Reego took more out of me than I thought," she says, "At least, I think it did, but I can't help but thing I...oh...crap..."

Which is right when Kyoko's eyes roll up, and she collapses to the floor.

...

Loading MAGI Server:

Setting: Kiko's Magical Pony Land

Rei opens her eyes to find herself sitting on a bench in an open field. Around her are ponies and bunnies, made of fire. Of course, she realizes, this must be one of her sister's virtual environments inside the MAGI. It all makes sense.

"*Momma!"*

She looks down. The four Reego, her mind***babies,*** have gathered in front of her. To her left, she looks at the leg of Go-kun, who's head disappears beyond the cloud cover of the virtual environment before he shrinks down to around Rei's level. Behind her mind***babies*** is JA-Tan, holding a tray with a saucer and tea, demurely sipping it as the mind***babies*** crowd around Rei and her Eva.

"My mind***babies!***" Rei squeals, "What you doing here?"

"*We wanted to fix things with you and Daddy, Momma!"* Una says, "*00-EM's Momma and Daddy are together and happy and that's not fair! We*

want our Momma and Daddy to be together!"

Her mind***baby*** pouts, which is quite adorable despite her being a spider tank with a child's torso and arms, covered in armor and cybernetics. In response, Rei claps her hands together and squeals, grabbing her armored mind***baby*** and pulling her into a hug.

"**Well...girls, what did you do?**"

"*We had our crony hack the launch controls so we could get some alone time,*" Duae says, "*And we really had to! Mommas and Daddys are supposed to be together, and JA-Tan's been really nice to us and wants to help us get you two together and married and stuff!"*

All five Rei and Rei-descended organisms squeal, clapping their hands together at the thought of the wedding, and *cake.*

"Well, that's a great idea," Rei says, "Buuuu~ut kind doesn't work. 'Cause your Daddy and I have never been together. We never even went on a date. And Little Mommy always told me you have to date before you getting married and have more ***babies*** and when I asked her about having ***babies*** of my own Little Mommy starts crying and stuff. And things."

Go-kun clears his throat.

"**Girls. I understand that you want me and your mother to be together, but the fact of the matter is that you were not born like human children. You were created when we were trapped by Iruel.**"

"*Butbutbut!*" Tres says, stamping her foot, "*We remember you being our Momma and Daddy and being together! We remember our birthdays and our spending time as a family and Daddy murdering Uncle Uri with a power drill every week!"*

"*And stuff!"* Ivy adds, "*Cause we had a great plan to get you together and besides which you're having sex all the time!"*

Go-kun and Rei turn to their youngest mind***baby***. Rei cocks an eyebrow. She's relatively sure that she hasn't done the nasty with her 220' tall war machine. She'd remember if she did.

"...really?"

"**How?**"

"Auntie Zyuu explained it to us," Una says, "*When your Entry Plug goes in and out of Daddy's neck, that means you're 'getting it on'. Just like when Uncle Shinji does it with Auntie Ichi!"*

"...**Really?"**

"*Yep! And Auntie Zyuu says that it's really special when it's with your brother, and that's cause Auntie Zyuu's really responsible and taught us all about the birds and the bees and stuff and how the Entry Plug's a special sort of bond!"*

Rei taps her fingers on her knee.

"Ah...um...but Uncle Shinji's a boy, and Auntie Ichi's a girl," she says, "So doesn't that make your Daddy your Momma? And doesn't that make me your Daddy?"

The four Reego smile. JA-Tan raises an eyebrow, and shakes her head, turning an dwalking away.

"*Uh huh,"* Una says, "*Can we still call you Momma? Even if your really our Daddy? And if you're our Daddy, does that mean you're now the 'man in your ree lay shun ship?'"*

"Nah, he's still the Man," Rei says, "*I'm* the *Rei.* But your Daddy and I are really good friends, not the sort of friends that your Uncle Shinji and Auntie Asuka are. We're partners, but in the 'blow stuff up for *GREAT JUSTICE'* and not the 'cuddle' sorta way, and we really don't want to ruin what we've got."

"*Butbutbut,*" Una says, hopping down from her mother, "*But we want you to be happy! And it'd be really hard to be our Momma without our Daddy!"*

And Rei smiles. That's it, she thinks. Everything is too easy for her, so she needs a challenge, just like she thought, and her mind***babies*** have delivered.

"Yes!" she says, standing, pumping her fist into the air, "That's exactly what I need! Adversity builds character! And being a single teenage mother will be the greatest adversity I can ask for!"

The four Reego's faces drop. Save for Ivy, who only smiles wider.

"So we're gonna get to bond and stuff and I gotta get you a preschool and I have to be the best single teenage Mom ever!" Rei says, "*For*

GREAT JUSTICE!"

"*Yeah, this didn't work,"* Tres sighs, "*Great plan, Una."*

"*Shaddup, Tres."*

Chapter 91: That Relative Thing

"So, NERV will keep us appraised of anything that happens while we're gone, and more importantly I have the girls keeping tabs on everything. Although apparently, Zyuu has a boyfriend. Who isn't related." Yui cocks an eyebrow at the Section 2 report. "Well, that's reassuring. At least."

Asuka grabs the PDA out of Yui's hand, just in time for Yui to look back up and put her hands back on the wheel, turning back to the road and shrugging as the head of Project E continues driving.

"P-please keep y-your eyes on the road," Asuka squeaks, one hand wrapped around the paper bag, the other holding the PDA.

"Relax," Yui says, reaching to the cup colder and popping the lid on the red and blue can, "I admit, it has been a while since I've gone out driving but it's like riding a bike. You don't forget how to drive."

She brings the can to her lip, draining it in one long pull, Asuka watching, mesmerized as Yui downs the can of hyper caffeinated liquid with the same aplomb Misato does her beer. A belch and Yui tosses the empty can over her shoulder, joining its siblings in the floor of the back seat of the white sedan.

"D-Dr. Ikari, th-thats your fourth Red Bull," Asuka says, "A-and we're not even outside of S-s-sendai y-yet."

"I know," Yui says, reaching behind her, fishing through the cooler set up behind Asuka's seat and taking out another can, "Well, it's a habit I have. Whenever I need to do a long trip, I always need to have something to keep my mind focused, so I don't fall asleep at the wheel or something like that."

Asuka squeaks, wrapping her hand around the door handle.

"Hey, it's only...lessee," Yui says, snatching the PDA out of Asuka's hand, "Ah! 490 miles to go! I think I can get there in about five hours! Bet you we can get there in less."

And she slams the pedal down. The Toyota sedan, dated from before Second Impact, purrs as it accelerates down the road, down the cross country highway towards Okayama.

Chapter 91: That Relative Thing

His name is Ryoji Kaji. Of course, his proper name is Kaji Ryoji, but when in Rome, do as the Romans do, so he follows the western tradition of putting the family name last and visa versa. In this case, he isn't in Rome. Rome is underwater, after all, flooded from the rising waters of Second Impact. Instead, he is outside of Berlin, hanging up his dress uniform in the closet of the guest room.

This is the Makinami Estate, the house that once belonged to Lorenz Kihl but now belongs to Kaworu Nagisa. He can hear the sounds of construction machinery repairing the damage to the upper floors caused by the booby trapped explosive Kei triggered. That is one of the reasons he is here. The others are more...subtle...investigations.

A door knock. Kaji stands up straight, sliding his hands into his pockets. His fingers slide into the grips of the brass knuckles he keeps in his pants pockets, just in case this is someone paying him a 'visit' and not a visit.

"Come in."

The door swings open. A slight stumble to her step, and Claire Makinami enters.

"Miss Makinami," he says, still keeping his grip tight, "What do I owe this pleasure to?"

Claire snorts, laughing faintly into her mouth.

"Cut the crap, Inspector," she says, "We both know why you're here. Someone tried to burn Ayanami alive and her dear mother sent you over."

"You have me at that," Kaji says with a smile, "I wear my servitude to Doctor Ikari on my sleeve. Doesn't mean I can't be pleasant, though."

He smiles. The lady killer smile, the one he doesn't use with Misato. She smiles back, shifting slightly, swaying a bit. His smile isn't that effective, he muses, but he can smell the vodka on her breath, so that has something to do with it.

.o.

In scientific thought, there is a term called Occam's Razor. It is a principle that generally recommends selecting the competing hypothesis that makes the fewest new assumptions, when the two hypotheses are equal in other respects. In the third hour of the drive, Asuka has found a flaw in her previous belief that the many, many oddities of the Ree were all inherent behavior derived from their link to Lilith. She has previously been ignoring the role of the genetic template from which they were cloned, and its place, through nature and nurture, in leading eight nephilim murder machines into becoming the eight balls of energy, neuroses, and insanity that they are now.

To put it bluntly, before now, she was making the assumption that Dr Yui Ikari, head of Project Eva, was a sane, well-balanced human being.

It's not an assumption she's making any more..

"Mother *fucker!"* Yui yells, slamming her palm against the horn, her free hand flipping her middle finger in what she hopes is full view of the car that cut them off, "I have half a mind to have Section 2 have him taken out and sh...oh right I'd never do that of course. Dipshit. Fucking half-assed driver probably got his license out of a cereal box!"

Popping open the can of Red Bull, she sips from it as she puts both hands back on the wheel.

"So, I figured now's a good time to chat," she says, "You know, girl time. Girl talk. We haven't had nearly enough chances to talk lately, and I'm figuring Alicia's going to want to kill me when we get to the house, so might as well make the most of it. How's things with Shinji?"

"F-fine," Asuka squeaks, holding onto the door handle, toes curled inside her sneakers.

"'Kay. If it helps, I'm sorry about blowing up at you two about...well, you know," Yui responds, "There's teenage hormones, then there's spending time face to face with Lilith. The fact that you two haven't...well...since then does speak volumes about how serious the two of you are."

Asuka cocks an eyebrow, shakily turning from view of approaching death that is an Ikari driver and turning to the driver herself.

"I'm serious," Yui says, "You're young, your guardians are working enough that you can do whatever you want, and according to the tests you've run you're free of the main consequence. That you're keeping

things under control speaks volumes of your commitment, Asuka. I'm actually proud of you two."

"Th-thank you."

Yui smiles, sipping her energy drink.

"So, assuming that we fix the whole 'baby-making' problem, I'm partial to the name 'Ariel,' myself for my first organic granddaughter..."

---

o..

Sixth Child recognized. Synchronization at 73%. Unit-04a has activated.

The entry plug blinks on, the soft glow of the lights of the Second Branch's hangar illuminating the LCL filled tube. Blinking at the light, Kei Ayanami dancers her fingers over the holographic console, the high collar of her custom plugsuit flickering as the display appears before her eyes.

"Almacia."

Another hologram appears in front of her, courtesy of the projectors that she installed in the entry plug. That, combined with the plugsuit (a late birthday gift from Asuka, which she will admit she gushes over as it is the first time she's received a birthday present from someone not related to her), makes the entry plug more immersive than standard.

"*Ready for VR entry, mother,"* the AI of Unit-04a, a copy of what she would look like if she was four, says, "*Inserting in 4...3...2...1...VR Insertion."*

And the entry plug goes white.

...

"I don't get why *I* have to do this."

"Because as Sub-Director, it is your job to do all the demeaning work that the Commander doesn't want to do."

Leaning against the car, Pieter Sohryu grimaces, shrugs, and scratches

his head in order. His guest, the bluenette third head of Project E, lights a cigarette, taking a drag and leaning against the car next to him.

"Weird. I'd think Ikari would want to be the one to register his grandkids at pre-school," he says, "Come to think of it, why are we registering them *at* a pre-school? I mean, anything they need to learn they could just get by plugging themselves into a computer or something."

"Pieter, they're not strictly AI entities," Ritsuko responds, "Well, we're not sure exactly what they are. And besides which, they do need to be socialized. So since Maya's handling things at NERV and things seem to be quiet, we should be here and be responsible adults and help supervise Rei's mindbabies."

He blinks. Turns to her.

"Her what?"

"Spend too much time around Rei, pick up her habits," she responds, "How's Sohryu?"

"Complaining about headaches," Pieter responds, "Nothing's wrong with her, but she's on bedrest for the next day."

The three girls run past, Duae dragging 00-EM, in a 60 cm tall robot duplicate of Shinji, after them. Trailing behind them, Ivy stomps past, the eight legged tank racing after her sisters and cousin.

"We really need to talk with her about hijacking vehicles," Pieter sighs.

"You first."

"Yeah. Say, I've read the reports. The kid, Ohm, he's technically Kei and Nagisa's AI kid, right?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't we have a Lil' Nagisa avatar body?"

"Recalled by the merchandise department," Ritsuko responds, "It came with a small cat doll. Turned out to be a choking hazard."

---

o.o

That's another six Red Bulls in the back seat, joined by a large blue can with something resembling a lightning bolt on it and a screw on cap. Jolt, she thinks it was called, but Dr. Ikari chugged the entire can like Misato used to chug her morning beer.

"B-but 'Ariel'?" Asuka asks, "That sounds...um...like an Angel."

"I have no doubt we'll run into an Angel called that," Yui responds, "I guess I just like the name. All my other grandchildren don't have names like that. I guess I just want one to stand out."

Yui pauses, blanches.

"That came out wrong," she says, "I made it sound like I don't *like* any of my grandchildren. Maybe I'm a little disturbed by the circumstances, I guess. Kei's children are...well, unique. But also, since most of them were created when she still resented me, I think they don't want much to do with me. Except her newest ones, who are rather sweet, even if they're...well, lacking in a way to interface."

She sighs.

"I guess it's one way to see how Kei's changed over the past few months."

"Wh-what about the Reego?"

Yui sighs again. It is a heavier, weightier sigh.

"The Reego aren't technically my grandchildren," Yui responds, "Well, psychologically they are. Personality wise, they are. And I admit, I do enjoy being around them and they are sweet, in a non-Euclidean sort of way, but...Asuka, do you know how we have the Israfim running around, and how Lilly is a branch off of Leliel?"

Asuka nods.

"The Reego are the same," Yui says, "Biologically. Of-"

"Iruel."

The name sends a chill down Asuka's spine. Even months later, even with the mental attack on them resolved, even with the Angel of Terror ultimately completely destroyed, she shivers at the name.

"S-so what do we tell them?"

"We don't," Yui responds, "We work to get nurture to overcome nature. Even if they aren't biologically my grandchildren...and let's face it, none of my grandchildren fit the term 'biologically', it doesn't change the fact that for every other purpose they are, and I'm not going to treat them any differently because of it. Besides which, there's no love lost between them and Iruel. I've asked them. They hate him more than everyone else does, if you ask me."

"R-really?"

Yui nods, sipping at another Red Bull. She taps the can with her finger, swerving the car into the left lane as her face goes more than a little pensive.

"Well, yes," she says, "They're very open about what they feel. Advantages of being children, I guess."

...

Loading virtual environment.

Setting: Tokyo-3. Scenario: Sixth Angel.

"Kei, don't worry. I did ask Miss Makinami if she would be upset with our using her predecessor's image. She was very...well, she was very agreeable. She has no love lost towards Ramiel."

Floating in the air in front of the silver and gray Unit-04a, Kaworu clears his throat, turning from the silhouette of the massive diamond over the simulation of Tokyo-3 to the Evangelion. Hands folded behind his back, dressed in a black and gray business suit, he floats backwards to give the Eva a clear line of sight.

The Eva itself is well armed. The massive shield is almost the size of the Evangelion itself, and in its right hand the Eva carries one of the black replica Lances. All simulations, of course- the cost of actually creating a battle like this, outside of somehow resurrecting Ramiel, would be prohibitive.

"Remember, use the Lance to penetrate the Core."

"**You would give tips on penetration.**"

"Quiet, Zeruel."

In the weeks since his defeat and subsequent imprisonment in NERV-2, there has developed a detente between Zeruel and Nagisa. For those who know what Nagisa is, they find this both a relief and cause for concern. For those who don't, it was charming, in a dorky sort of way.

"Very well," Kei says, urging forward Unit-04a, "Mm. Almacia?"

The hologram, an image of a pale child of four, with blue hair and red eyes, appears in front of her.

"The controls feel sluggish," Kei says, "Almacia, are you distracted?"

A pause from the virtual avatar of the Keiwaru that Kei inserted into Unit-04a's core, as her method of cheating at synchronization. The girl purses her lips, averts her eyes from Kei's own, and Kei sighs and taps up a screen, going over logs from Unit-04a's computer access.

"I see. When Inspector Kaji came to the mansion, you became curious."

Kei smirks.

"*I am...curious,"* Unit-04a's AI says, "*He...looks nice."*

"Do you feel an increase in temperature when looking at Inspector Kaji? Does your camera based vision begin to blur?"

"*Yes."*

"Ah. Well, I think you may have a crush on him."

The little girl pauses, staring at her mother-entity.

"*I'm **four.**"* Comes the ice-cold response.

...

"I've gained at least four kilos since the Angels started coming," Yui says with a sigh, tapping the chopsticks on the side of the rice bowl, "It must be the stress."

Stress. Stress sounds roughly correct, Asuka believes. Stress is something she is experiencing. No, wait. That's terror.

Terror is definitely driving in a car with anyone from the Ikari

bloodline. As much as she loves him, when she gets back to Tokyo-3, she's laying groundwork with Shinji that he is never getting his driver's license. Ever.

"Um...D-D-Dr. Ikari, h-how long have you know M-Misato?"

Yui perks an eyebrow, flipping through emails on her PDA.

"Some time, actually," she says, "We met a few times before she came to Tokyo-3. Why?"

"J-just testing a h-hypothesis."

There are five food stands at the standard rest stop, right off of the main highway where they stopped, two and a half hours and halfway to Okayama. Her nerves, Asuka's nerves, are still shot. She believed Yui, Dr. Ikari, was a normal, stable person. She now believes that Rei's eccentricity is equally nature as much as nurture, and she may have learned her proclivities from watching her mother as much as inheriting them from her genetic source.

Still, she thinks, working her chopsticks through the steamed chicken and rice dish, at least the trip is halfway over. No, she realizes, sipping her milk tea, it is a quarter way over. They still have to go back.

Yui sips her coffee, blanches, and reaches into her purse. Taking out a polished steel tin, she works the top of the thermos, popping it open. The smell of freshly brewed coffee, a deep aroma for some reason not getting the attention of the others sitting at the highway rest stop.

"I always keep a thermos with me for long trips," Yui says, tipping over the paper cup and emptying its contents on the cement floor before refilling it with the yellow tinted, black liquid from inside the thermos.

"What is that?" Asuka asks, leaning forward...and stopping when she hears...no, feels it. Like a chill falling over the entire stop, like the sound a snake would make before it strikes. A chill, cold and tight, falls into her gut, and she looks up to see the source; Yui, hissing, before she catches herself and clears her throat, the head of Project E forcing a smile.

"Sorry," she says, "It's a special blend. I get...*territorial*...with my coffee. Helps that my nine nephilim children can't be given caffeine. Last time Rei did, she left dents in load bearing walls."

Yes, Asuka thinks. Rei may have *learned* behavior instead of *inherited* behavior.

"Um...should we b-be talking about this?" Asuka asks, "Isn't this classified?"

"No need to worry," Yui says, sipping her coffee, "Everyone here is Section 2."

...

"*I'm **four** and I'm not **disgusting** like you are."*

Kei sighs, rolling her eyes, hands folded on her lap as she stares at the avatar of Unit-04a's AI.

"Yes, but I'll remind you that you're based on me. Even if your psyche is subjectively four, you still have similar interests and a mindset like mine, and probably find Mr. Kaji attractive."

Almacia narrows her red, red eyes.

"*I thought you were doing **things** with Mr. Nagisa.*"

She looks from side to side, as if being watched. Leaning forward, the virtual girl's voice falls to a whisper.

"*Icky things."*

Ah, children, Kei thinks, or at least virtual children. She imagines she would have been much like this when she was four. If she was ever four. Then again, when she was ten, which is when she would have had four years of life experience, she was already quite bitter at the world and resentful of her sisters. But then again, *again,* she's also come to the conclusion she was quite stupid back then.

"*Not that I like Mr. Nagisa, because he's a disgusting old **ogre**and you two **kiss** in front of me where I have to watch."*

"Well, just because I've ordered doesn't mean I can't look at the menu," Kei responds, and blanches, "Did I say that? Did I really say that? I should ask Annette what that means..."

"*Oh, so this is all just an elaborate plot to partake of his flesh and gain his power? In that case, can I eat Mr. Nagisa? You already have an S2 organ."*

Kei pauses. The sounds of the rolling virtual battle outside the plug briefly rumble, as Almacia smiles, a forced, toothy thing.

"*Pretty please? All the MP Evas have S2 organs and I want one, too."*

"You have an N2 engine and you don't need a cord."

"*So you're not planning to eat him?"*

"Not in that way...no."

Almacia arches an eyebrow, a motion far too wise and mature for a 4 year old. Well, that is her *thing,* Kei decided. Being *mature.*

"I could explain. But it would be *icky.*"

"*Ah.* ***Kissing.****"*

"And besides which, missy, the S2 organs are a privilege, not a right. Your MP sisters have shown themselves to be very responsible and have earned their S2 organs. But, if you show yourself to be responsible, I'll consider giving you an S2 organ for your birthday."

Kei sighs, reaches up and rubs the bridge of his nose.

"*But the MPs already have their* ***wolves****!"* Almacia pouts, *"And* ***OMEGA*** *isn't responsible! She already painted herself with non-regulation colors!"*

"**OMEGA** doesn't talk back to me."

Almacia's pout deepens. It is the same thing Kei did...no, no. Kei also ranted a lot under her breath-

"*grmble...doesn't even have cognitive ability past 'doggie' and 'pony'..."*

Yes, there it is, Kei thinks.

"And everything out of your mouth seems to be about things being either icky or disgusting," Kei continues, "You know, it would serve you well to interact more with your sisters. I certainly should have when I was your age..."

She blanches, again, and her shoulders sag as the realization hits her like a ton of bricks.

"My God, I've turned into my mother."

"*From residual memory bleedthrough, I can conjecture that was your life's goal."*

"*...flurgen."*

"*Kei."*

She looks out the front of the entry plug, looking past Alicia to see the smoking ruins of the virtual Tokyo-3, the blasted remains of the virtual Ramiel, and Kaworu floating in front of them, covered in soot and arms folded.

"*End simulation."*

...

Asuka tested the hypothesis. She approached a couple who were sitting across the rest stop from them. They confirmed they were, in fact, Section 2. Then another pair. Section 2. The janitors at the stop. Section 2. She didn't check out the men's toilets, so she can't confirm it entirely, but everyone else she talked to was, in fact, Section 2.

"Yeah, we keep a pretty steady presence when it comes to Project E and the pilots," the young man around Misato's age says, sitting at the table with Yui and Asuka, sipping at the soda through a straw, "All in all, NERV has about five agents per command-level personnel. About ten per Pilot, and since we knew you were doing this trip, we doubled the numbers and have stops set up across the route."

"Really," Yui says, the inflection in her voice implying the sarcasm or criticism to be less genuine than Asuka's, "Section 2 commits that level of resource to protect us?"

"And wh-what about the children?" Asuka asks, "There are kids here."

The Section 2 man, who's name she wasn't given, sips his soda and nods.

"Oh, those're our kids, mostly," he responds, "Most of the kids here are from 'take your kid to work day.'"

"Most of them?"

"The others are midgets."

"Huh," Asuka responds, and begins scanning over the crowd, trying to figure out which is which, "S-so Section 2 is always watching us?"

"Mostly passive," the agent responds, "We have motion sensors, video and audio set up in all the apartments. Also, we tend to recommend pilots and staff living together so we can concentrate our resources. You have no idea how happy my boss was when you, Ikari, and Katsuragi ended up living together. That meant we could get nearly thirty agents in the same area."

Asuka twitches a bit. Twenty five people watching her at all times. That was one revelation she could do without.

"Welp, then I guess we're in safe hands," Yui says, sipping her coffee, "So, ready to go?"

"A-actually, Dr. Ikari...um...I wanted to ask something..."

.

Two Section 2 agents lean against the car, checking their PDAs with puzzled expressions upon their faces. Blinking, one shuts his PDA off, pinching the bridge of his nose and turning to the other.

"Oh...kay," he says, "So, Akagi wants us to keep an eye out for Director Sohryu straddling a metal spider, and watch out for rampaging Little Reis who may have begin hunting the kids in the Pilot's class. Right."

"Yeah, I'm thinking that's another head scientist who's gone whacko."

Which is when, if on Providence or on cue, Touji Suzuhara runs past, screaming. As the boy has a history of athletics and is in good shape for a kid his age, and the two agents can see he's been doing this a while from the trail of sweat behind him. As for the reason for the running, screaming, and sweating, that comes in the form of twenty miniature Reis running after him.

"After them! Faster! *Faster!*"

Which is when the spider tank zooms past. They can see, straddling the back, Sub Director Sohryu. Sitting on Sohryu's lap is one of the other miniature robots, the one patterned after Pilot Ikari.

"*Yaaa~aaa~ay! I'm a steee~eed!*"

And the tank, as well, disappears in the distance, chasing after Suzuhara and the horde of chibiRee. Trailing behind them is Akagi, holding a net and yelling for them to slow down.

"Okay," the agent says, "Maybe Akagi's *not* crazy."

"And maybe we need to start drinking."

...

The black SUV pulls up to the house in Western Okayama, the two story wood and brick house a half mile walk from the city center. The back doors open and Asuka and Yui climb out, Yui pursing her lips and hefting her purse onto her shoulder. She says nothing, not pointing out how Asuka convinced Section 2 to drive them the rest of the way rather than endure Yui's driving for another three hours.

She doesn't need to. She can bring this up later. But, since her car has been taken back to Tokyo-3, she can't drive them back.

For Asuka, on the other hand, she is fixated on the house. This is where Shinji lives for ten years, after all. These are the people he grew up with, the town he grew up in. As much as has happened to them in Tokyo-3, it is still their recent life. This, on the other hand, is history.

And then the door opens. The blonde woman opens it, her face set, her arms folded. Yui forces a smile, which does not change the woman's expression.

"Yui," the woman says. Cold. Icy. Either a curse or benediction the name comes out as.

"Alicia," Yui responds, "We need to talk."

...

He follows the sound of the breathing. Nothing else works- his inquiries were met with blank stares. Asking Mother about her was followed by her asking who he was talking about. The MAGI held no record. Only he remembered. Which is when he also remembered that he has not seen her for several days.

"I know you're here."

Uri grimaces. He can feel it, the presence. There was no sign for the past week, and the recesses of his mind did not find that odd. But he still remembered, even if Mother didn't, even if Asuka didn't, even if no one else did.

"*You shouldn't be here."*

The voice comes from the front, down the corridor deep underneath the Cages.

A faint light, up ahead, and Uri walks into the clearing, into the larger area of the corridor to find her. A mirror of his sister, surrounded by a sphere of orange light, naked.

"Zophael."

"*It was almost perfect,"* the girl sighs, "*Just my luck that my powers don't work on my own kind.*"

"I asked Mother. She has no memory of you. Asuka has no memory of you. Siyon has no memory of you," Uri says, "Did you mind control them?"

"*I withdrew their memories,*" the girl says, as the sphere becomes opaque, "*I couldn't tell you. I'm trying to learn about the Lilim. Learn what and why they are. But I couldn't do it as I thought, so I had to withdraw, make them forget."*

Uri grinds his teeth.

"You tampered with minds."

"*You can't miss what you don't remember, Uri. I don't want to hurt them, or you. Leave me be. Let me start over."*

"Mother collapsed. Your retracting memories caused her to have a seizure. NERV staff are getting headaches from what you're doing, migraines. This is hurting people."

A sphere of orange light forms in his hand, snapping out into a blade of fire.

"I can't do that, Zophael."

The sphere spins, glowing, illuminating the corridor before there is a

sound like a cracking egg which sends the room into darkness...

And then the light flickers, radiating from the new beast. A great thing, with talons of a bird, standing upon for legs, massive, feathered wings folding out from its back, its skin, scales, and feathers glowing a hot white. Gone are the teutonic features which mirrored his sister. Gone is the humanity and the youth, all gone save for the blue eyes which look upon him past the long, glowing beak of her draconian face.

"***Fine."***

0.0.o

The door jimmies open. Deep within the Second Branch, the lock releases, and Kaji opens the door to the part of NERV-2 that he absolutely does not have clearance to. Deep within the base, dozens of floors down, not on any map, there are the labs that apparently lead to the creation of the Mark-09 and the Mark-08.

Of course, 'apparently' is the operative word. No information exists on either the 06, the 08 or the 09. And considering that the Committee wants to put Asuka in the Mark 08, this has more than a few of the higher ups at Headquarters more than a little curious about the newest Eva.

The lab is dimly lit. The lights above flicker, illuminating the central table with the holographic display, long powered down. This, he thinks, is definitely where Dr. Ikari wants him to be. There has to be information here on the Marks, on whatever Kihl was doing.

And possibly related to the attempt on Kei's life by a dead man.

"So," he says, and smirks, "What first?"

Click.

The cold metal barrel presses against the back of his head. In the mirrored surface of the door, Kaji can see Claire Makinami behind him.

"Well, I think explanations are in order," she says, "And we work from there."

Chapter 92: Flurgen

The school bell rings, and the doors of the Tokyo-3 Municipal Middle/ High school open to release their charges for the day. First to exit are the children of Class 0A. Their classroom on the first floor, they are the youngest students of the massive school- twelve years old, some thirteen, all of them still children and yet beginning to blossom.

And today was the first day for the newest of their number, a young girl with black pig tails, clad in the green skirt and vest, and white blouse that the middle schoolers wear.

Ichi Ikari, child of Yui Ikari, Gendo Ikari, and Lilith, skips at the front of the crowd of new kids she's just met. The noise in her joints is barely audible, a full week of being coached in how to move now that she's a pubescent teenage girl making her blend in, she completes her tradition and, with a swing of her right foot, launches her shoe.

There is a snap and a crack. The sneaker, propelled by hydraulics instead of muscle, warps the air as it exceeds the speed of sound, leaving a trail of smoke from literal burning rubber before it punches through the side of the garbage truck, launching skyward and impacting a green and silver pigeon that passes by.

The Israbird is dead before it hits the ground. As the garbage falls onto the street, the stench wafts through the air. Monkey like, green and silver, some orange and silver, the Israfim come out of the bushes, raiding the piles of fresh refuse...and then they freeze. They turn, their mask like faces centering on Ichi.

The girl, her foot still in mid swing, freezes as the remnants of the Angel focus their attention on her. They sense her- that she is, in fact, the Enemy. That she is somehow the same as the greater body the Lilim use to destroy the Angels. The one they fear. The one that *defeated Father.*

"Um...hi?"

Claws out, the Israfim advance, lining up in a pyramid formation in front of the students, arms up over their head. The other boys and girls in her class, barely out of childhood, scream. Ichi, on the other hand, grins. Grabbing her backpack, she swings it off her back, wrapping the strap around her hand, she releases the locks on the shoulder harness and wraps the straps around each other into a

strong, knotted rope.

With a swing, the 10 pound backpack, filled with books, knowledge, and a lunch box, swings into the lead Israfim's face hard enough to take the head clean off, sending its body flailing as it breaks down into LCL.

"Oh, *yeah!"* Ichi yells, one hand grabbing the middle of the makeshift flail rope, directing the weapon-of-learning as the Israfim cautiously try to surround her, "This is the best first day *ever!"*

Chapter 92: Flurgen

The pile of rags, soaked in chloroform, lie at the feet of the two unconscious individuals at the entrance of the laboratory. Floating freely above the unconscious Kaji and Claire, the floating giant head of Almacia flicks the tips of her mouth in a frown.

She had hoped the rags, dropped from the ceiling vent, would be enough to incapacitate the woman. She did not want to resort to knock out gas, which incapacitated both of them.

Perhaps Mrs. Makinami is heavier than she put on her personnel file.

...

The door opens to the large living room, the other three walls leading to a hallway, a kitchen, and a dining room. It is nothing expansive, but it is big compared to the apartments Asuka has become used to. As she steps into the living room and on the hardwood floor, however, something begins to spark in the air, making the back of her neck twitch.

"Well, welcome to my home," Alicia Ikari says, arms folded as she walks into the living room, "How was your trip, Yui? Missing your children, yet?"

Flopping onto the couch opposite from the front door, the blonde american woman pulls her lips into a forced, civil smile as Yui enters, Asuka right behind her.

"Oh, do, please come in," Alicia continues, "I mean, after all, my house

is your house. My family is your family."

Asuka notices, then. She notices the tension, vibrating through the air, warping the space between them like a tight beam of mutual veiled anger. She would call Alicia cat like in her jabs, but Asuka has heard stories of what a Cat owned by an Ikari would be like. The fact that everyone still has a scalp indicates that it is not the case.

"Ah, there you are," the man says, a man who looks like Shinji in twenty years says, entering with an apron with the english words 'Spoon the Cook' emblazoned on it as he enters from another room, "Asuka, could you help me prepare dinner?"

She nods, following Tomoe Ikari out. They enter the kitchen, and as soon as they do he slams the door shut and bolts it.

"Oh, thank God," he says, breathless, "We can wait it out here. They can finish ripping into each other and then we can actually *talk*."

...

The floor explodes, metal crystallizing and shattering three floors below the Eva cages. The floors below the immediate maintenance areas of the Evangelions are, thankfully, empty. So, no one sees the glowing, golden white Griffon as it emerges, shrieking as he climbs up, testing its wings before it turns to find a figure emblazoned in golden light rising, holding a sword of fire in his hand.

Well, Zophael thinks, this idea may *not* have been well thought out.

...

The doors to the mausoleum open, and Gendo Ikari looks up at the sound of the wheels squeaking. Looking up, he hides the look of surprise behind his reflective amber lenses, he folds his hands in front of his face as the sweaty, grunting Pieter Sohryu parks the trolly in front of the desk.

"What is this?" the Supreme Commander of NERV asks.

"Paperwork," he second grunts, "Every bit of paperwork since Vegas. That. Hasn't been. Filed."

Gendo looks at the boxes, stacked. Twelve boxes in all, each weighing at least twenty kilos.

"Have Katsuragi file them."

"Can't. Busy. Test running new Angel defense net at the bay."

"Akagi."

"Diagnostics on 00. Asked Kyoko. Threatened me."

Gendo grunts. It is not an expressive grunt, but the message is conveyed all the same. Leaning against the desk, Pieter locks eyes with his superior, the look of desperation on his face palpable.

"Ikari," he says, "We're the only two staff who do not have something to do, and we need to get this done, and I am *not* doing this alone."

Gendo sighs, and presses a button. The front of the mausoleum desk desk folds, unfolding into a second desk as a chair rises. Grabbing a box, Pieter drops it onto the desk, opening it and pulling out financial forms.

"Let's get to work."

...

She managed to avoid the living room altogether. Which was quiet. Too quiet. Instead, while Tomoe was still preparing dinner, and insisting that Asuka did not have to cook because she was a guest, he asked her to check up on Annette.

Walking down the hallway, she sees the door. There is a glow underneath, a steady glow of some sort of light, faint blue. And Asuka walks to it, bringing up her knuckles to knock on it-

"**AND THEN WE TORE THEM APART.**"

"Very good."

That voice. She recognizes that voice, Asuka realizes. It was the same voice she heard when they were trapped in Leliel, when they were brought before an Angel to discuss peace.

"**IT WAS PLEASING. WE HAVE BEEN PREPARING.**"

"Good," Annette's voice responds, "When will you be ready?"

"**SOON. WE WISHED TO TELL YOU OF THE-**"

Zeruel. The voice is that of Zeruel. It all makes sense to Asuka. Why Annette has been out of touch, why no one's heard from her despite her being so central to Uri's life. She's working for the Angels!

Forcing open the door, Asuka grabs her shoe off her foot to wield like a weapon, swinging open the door with impromptu club high...

And the two residents of the room turn to her. Annette, sitting on the cushion on the floor, hair in curlers and in a bathrobe. And the flickering blue image of a six year old girl, in a school girl uniform and holding a stuffed doll resembling one of the MP-Evas.

"Asuka?"

"**HELLO.**"

Shoe forgotten in her hand, she stares at the little girl which has nonetheless just spoken with the voice of a physical god. This is Zeruel. At least, that is her first conclusion. She may, however, be wrong.

"Um..."

The girl releases the plush doll, which flaps its small, stubby wings, flapping around her on the flowing projector pad.

"Asuka, this is **OMEGA,"** Annette explains, "We were just talking about manners and speaking propertly."

"**YES. MISS ANNETTE HAS BEEN HELPING ME SOUND MORE LIKE A GROWN-UP.**"

...

"NERV spent...how much on shell casings?" Pieter asks, "And ammo? Have we *ever* killed an Angel with a pallet rifle?"

"Better safe than sorry."

Pieter looks up from the forms. Sighing, he turns back to them, signing them off. Taking another from the box, the second since

they've started an hour and a half ago, he takes a look at it and grumbles.

"This is one of Kyoko's requests," he says, "I can't sign off on this."

"Trade you for one of Yui's."

"Deal."

The two commanding officers swap their packets of authorization forms, flipping through the papers and initialing them. It is then that Pieter notices the presence hanging over him, the gaze upon him. Looking up and over his shoulder, he comes face to face with the small black ball, about the size of a basketball now.

8I.

"Hey, Lilly," he says, "Sorry, but we're not doing anything *in*teresting right now. So can you go find Mari? I'm sure it will cheer her up."

8P.

And with a pop, Lilly disappears.

"Huh," Pieter says, and turns back to Gendo, "Should I be worried that I now speak wormhole? I remember the Second Branch. It was normal, there."

"Normal can be good."

"Hm," Pieter breathes, and looks up from yet another authorization form, "It just struck me. I've been here for a few months and I still don't know you that well. Well, Fuyutsuki was one of your professors back in school right?"

"Sort of," Gendo responds, signing off reflexively on another Project E authorization, "He was Yui's advisor. He unintentionally set me and Yui up. I mainly had Kozou come on as Sub Commander because he knew almost as much about Yui's work as she did."

"Huh." Pieter taps his pen on the desk. "Makes sense. You three knew each other pretty well. So, what *do* you do when you're not working?"

"Administration."

"I mean, hobbies," Pieter says, "What's your hobby?"

"Administration."

Pieter goes silent for a moment. He taps his fingers on the desk.

"Your...hobby...is *administration?*"

"I enjoy it," Gendo responds, "No end of the world, no last minute plans or desperate gambles. Just making sure everyone is clocked in, the elevators are running on time, and the paperwork is filed. It's relaxing."

Gendo looks up with that pronunciation to finally notice the ragdoll like avatar robot, shaped like a little boy, deactivated on the cart of paperwork.

"Is that..."

"Ohm," Pieter says, "Uh...I mean 00-EM. One of your...many...digital...grandkids. He's been hanging around me lately. Wants to learn from me. Yeah."

Gendo nods, and reaches into his desk. Taking out a large white sign, he hangs it from the hook which hands above his desk and which Pieter has now just noticed. The sign, which hangs at such an angle to be perfectly visible from the air duct vents, reads, "BORING PAPERWORK."

The effect is immediate. Pieter looks up to the duct work to hear scratching from several inhabitants turning around and crawling away, with mutterings of '*boring,' 'that sucks'* and *'find Aoba*' coming from the grates.

"Guess that helps," Pieter says, turning back to Gendo, "So, that should take care of everything right after Raziel, so next's the expense reports from-"

He looks to the side, to find Iti standing at the foot of the desk. Possibly from the suddenness, possibly from the prospect that a Ree could teleport, Pieter lets off a sharp, manly shriek. Gendo adjusts his glasses.

"Paperwork," he says.

"I like boring," Iti says, "I can help sort."

"Wh-why do you have a N-NERV grade holographic communicator?"

Annette pauses. The six year old girl, who nonetheless sounds like a mixture of Zeruel and ADAM, wisely pauses in her own discussion, sensing that this is a conversation for grown-ups, so she instead turns her attention to the free-floating MP-Eva plushie.

Pulling the pen out of her mouth, Annette inspects it for a moment before tucking it behind her ear.

"I have connections."

The room is not *normal.* That is the main conclusion Asuka has come to. In addition to the pad at the middle of the room, and the wires connecting it to the plastic, crescent shaped desk upon which three monitors and three glowing blue CPUs are mounted on, there are wires covering the entire, bright pink wall.

The walls are still pink. The bed is big and soft, with way too many pillows, the night stand holding a sealed, closed, unused diary. Everything says this is a girl's room. But then there is the massive computer display, the work stations, the equipment more set up for professional hackers than sixteen year old girls.

"S-so," Asuka says, pointedly ignoring the computer set up that costs more than Misato's old apartment, "U-Uri hasn't been talking, but I think he's...um...worried about you."

Annette nods, rising with the sound of popping joints, running her hands through her hair and walking over to her night stand. Taking out a black book from the draw, she sits on her bed, flipping through it.

"Um...well, I wanted to see how you were," Asuka says, "We've n-never gotten to really talk..."

"No, we never have," Annette says with a sigh, flopping onto the bed, "I'm your boyfriend's cousin, you're my 'boyfriend's' sister," she says with airquotes, "And we've never really met."

There is another six year old girl appearing behind **OMEGA,** tugging her shoulder.

"*'Meg,*" the girl says, her voice a sound like crystals ringing in unison, "*C'mon! Almacia's getting in trouble!"*

"And that is..." Asuka asks.

"Delta," Annette responds, flipping through the book, "I'm pretty good at telling them all apart. So, what's your question?"

The girls are gone. In the background of the projector, she can swear she can see a line of six to eight year olds filing past, whispering.

"Um...how exactly d-do you know them?" Asuka asks, scratching her head, "What...what exactly..."

Annette coughs, leaning back, tenting her fingers in front of her face.

"Well, it started some time ago, at Chairman Kihl's funeral," she explains, "Or as I like to call it,"

Epic Pony Saving Prana

Two weeks ago.

"So, Annette, how have you been?"

"Less...talking," the blonde girl puffed, thanking providence that she wore flats to the funeral, "More...running! How...could...he...?"

"How could he set the stables on fire and let loose wolves on them?" Kaworu asks, annoyingly not out of breath despite running at a full, desperate sprint alongside her, "I imagine easily. All he would need would be access to fire and wolves. Annette, this is the...man...who put a Cherubim in Unit-03. He...look, get on my back."

"F-F-Okay!" Her feet leave the ground, and thankfully she grabs Kaworu's shoulders, still mildly annoyed on how he can be running at full sprint without being tired or out of breath. Breathing heavily, the spots in front of her eyes slowly disappear. While maid work involved a lot of running around, it rarely involved frantic sprints.

"So, if it isn't rude to ask," Kaworu says, casually, "How are things with you and Uri? And how have you been adjusting to being back home with your parents? It must be nice to see them...or at least have proper parents-"

"Save...save your breath for running!"

Of course, that was more from anger at both questions than anything. Uri's been too busy piloting Zwei to pay any attention to her, and her parents are...well, a sensitive matter.

It took her a while to accept that the two old people were her parents, whom she hadn't been in the same room with for ten years.

And then they turned the corner, and Annette sees it. She sees the mountains in the distance, and the mountains move. In the darkness of night, she sees the massive shapes and hears the flapping of massive, impossible wings, the terrified whinnies of the horses and the howls of the wolves, the beating of wings a chorus over their terrified song. The mountains walk, or stumble, the ragged noise of breath in time with the sounds of destruction.

Annette shrieks. Kaworu comes to a steady stop, carefully put her down, and then folds his arms and clears his throat.

"Ahem!" he shouts, tapping his foot.

The first of the white giants unfolds itself from the no-longer-on-fire stable, turning as the second giant lands, the massive wings blocking out the light pollution from Berlin. It bends down to one knee, and speaks with a booming voice which hammers the minds and senses.

"**UM,**" it starts, "**UH. HELLO, DADDY.**"

"Daddy?" Annette hisses at Kaworu.

"I'll explain in a bit. What are you doing here, Meg?"

"**PONIES! AND DOGGIES!**"

"...okay, **OMEGA,** let's try this again," Kaworu sighs, "What are you and..." He glances at the second MP-Evangelion, "Delta doing out here? You know you aren't allowed out without supervision."

The second MP-Evangelion steps forward, wringing its hands in an action that would be adorable if it weren't sixty meters tall and had a mouth full of blunt teeth and no eyes.

"Daddy?" Annette asks, "Mind *explaining?"*

"I'll get around to it," Kaworu responds with a shrug, "I'm waiting."

"*Um,*" it starts, the voice having an underlying shriek and hiss to it, "*Well...uh...we heard some horses were in trouble, so we came out here to*

help save them! Yes. That's it."

The boy stared up at the two giants.

"Don't lie," he says, "You were going to kidnap the horses and tell everyone they were eaten by wolves. Which you also took. The horses are Annette's and you have to give them back."

Delta's head sinks down, a sigh like scraping crystals escaping.

"*Yes, Daddy."*

"**NO! MINE!**"

"Meg..."

"**MINE!**" Somehow, the voice of the primordial giant sounded like it was pouting. With a sigh, Annette pulls on Kaworu's shirt sleeve, pulling him aside.

"Kaworu," she says in that warning voice she rarely has to use, "I know you just got a girlfriend but..."

She gestures to the two giants.

"Really?"

The boy blushes, pink spreading on his pale features.

"Oh. Um. Well, if it helps they aren't *biological* children. They're fork-based AIs that are based on Kei's and my neural data," he explains, "They're subjectively six, but were raised in fast-time. In Evangelions."

"I see," Annette says, not really, "I...well, I thought since you and Kei aren't strictly human, that you..."

She unconsciously crosses her legs.

"Ow."

"Oh, don't worry about that. We're using protection."

The blonde facepalms.

"Kaworu, remember our many chats about things you don't say in public? This is one of them."

"Oops."

"**WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?**"

The two turn back to the Evangelions, which despite the lack of eyes were staring at them.

"***BABIES,*** *maybe?"* Delta asks, "*Cause they were talking about us."*

Kaworu blinks, sighs.

"Yes, exactly. We were talking about that, but before the diversion. Meg. Those are not your horses."

"**MY PONIES!**" the MP-Eva insists, the terrified whinnies in her left hand indicating that she did believe possession was nine tenths of the law.

"No, Meg, they are not."

"**ARE TOO!**"

"08-EF EVA0, I am your father and I am telling you that you may not steal Annette's horses."

"**B-B-BUT I WANNA PET! A REAL ONE! IT'S NOT F-FAIR!**"

Which is when Kaworu and Annette were privileged to witness the embarrassment of an MP-Evangelion crying at you. Annette sighs, resisting the urge to steeple her fingers, and tugs on Kaworu's sleeve.

"Listen," she called out to the...little girl. They very large little girl. With no eyes, flat teeth in a gaping maw, and flower decorated armor, "Right. What was her name, Omega?"

"Yes, **OMEGA.**" he responds, looking slightly lost.

"Right. **OMEGA.** I'm Annette, and I'm...well, I'm your mother's cousin, and I looked after your father when he was very young."

Delta looks down, her serpentine neck curving to let her stare eyelessly at the two.

"*Ooh! Really?"* she asks, enthusiasm and alienness evident in her voice, "*What was he like? Does that mean you're like the F8s for us?"*

"Ef...eights?" Annette asks, "Fates?"

"Their brothers and sisters," Kaworu explains, "Subjectively older AIs in the Berlin MAGI."

"...right," Annette sighs.

"They aren't the same type of AI according to Kei," Kaworu continues, "But they are aged in fast time too and-"

"Got it," she says, flapping him quiet, "Maybe. I think. Anyway. Anyway, I guess I am like him, because I looked after him, too."

"*Oo! Cool!"* Delta squeals, making Annette cover her ears at the scraping crystalline shriek, "*That means you must be really smart and cool, just like them!"*

"**NUH UH," OMEGA** pouts, "**YOU'RE JUST TRYING TO MAKE ME LIKE HER. BUT THE DOGGIES AND PONIES ARE MINE!"**

"Well, actually, I don't care about the wolves..."

"*Really? But they're doggies, and they're cute and fluffy and I licked one and it tasted funny."*

"...right," Annette says, and turns back to **OMEGA,** "Right. Well, **OMEGA,** I need to talk to you about the horses. Can you be a...big...girl and talk grown up about them?"

"**MINE!**"

"See, that's not very mature," Annette responds, "Pets are a big responsibility. I remember when your father got his first kitten."

"Don't bring that up," Kaworu says with a shudder.

"**KITTY, DADDY?"**

Kaworu remains silent.

"And so I have to be sure. Where do you live?"

"**DOES THAT MATTER?"**

"Yes it does," Annette responds, "You see, a horse has to have a lot of space to be happy. It needs a lot of outdoor time and a lot of grass."

"UM."

"*We live in the hangars underneath NERV-Berlin,"* Delta says, cheerfully, "*And we have lots of space and people to help us take care of the horses! And there's all the stuff we have there, like our lances and our spare armor and we could just have the maintenance people who help brush our teeth plant grass and stuff..."*

"Okay," Annette responds, "Okay. So, **OMEGA,** would you really want your horses to be unhappy?"

"**BUT...BUT...PONIES...**" she says, her primordial voice heartbroken.

"But that's why I need you to be a big girl," Annette says, "Firstly, you have all your new doggies to look after. Have you checked to make sure that they're alright?"

"**UH HUH. I PRACTICED PICKING THINGS UP AND EVERYTHING SO I WOULDN'T HURT THEM. I WOULDN'T WANT THEM TO EAT THE PONIES.**" She presented her right hand, from where the terrified howls could be heard. "**THAT WOULD BE MEAN.**"

"...right. See, that's what I'm looking for. You're a good girl. Isn't she, Kaworu?" A nudge to his ribs to make him agree.

"Yes, she is, but-"

Another elbow to silence him.

"See, you are," Annette says, "And that's why I need you to be brave and strong for me. You and your sister-"

"Well, nine of them in that batch," Kaworu interrupts, "There are actually several hundred more-"

"*Sisters,*" Annette continues, directing a glare at Kaworu, "Have a new job. You see, **OMEGA,** I can't easily move the horses back to where I live in Japan, and I certainly don't have the space to properly care for them. So they're going to keep living here with your Daddy. But your Daddy is very, very silly and not good with animals, so I'm going to ask you to help look after my horses and make sure they're happy and well cared for. And I will be checking up often, okay?"

"**R-REALLY?" OMEGA** booms, eyes she doesn't have wide.

"Yes."

The lips of the behemoth flutter. Then, "**THANK YOU THANK YOU**

THANK YOU! I PR-PROMISE I'LL LOOK AFTER THEM IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY AND BRUSH THEM AND CARE FOR THEM AND MAKE SURE THEY'RE THE HAPPIEST PONIES EVER!" A deep breath, which pushes the trees back, and "**THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU YOU'RE THE BEST AUNTY EVER AUNTY ANNETTE AND I PROMISE I'LL NEVER LET YOU DOWN EVER!**"

Annette smiles. Yes, the voice was...not...that of a child's but it definitely had a child's enthusiasm.

"Okay. So, will you put them down?"

"*We put our the fire. Else they wouldn't have a place to live."*

"**KAY.**"

The giant lowers her hand that does not have wolves, releasing the horses. The horses collapse, terrified and exhausted, but a cursory examination from Annette confirms they are all fine, just relieved.

"Okay," Kaworu adds, "I think it's time for you to head home. If the maintenance staff find you not in your hangars, they could tell your mother, and you don't want her to find out."

"*'Kay, Daddy!*" Delta says, unfurling her wings, "*It was really nice to meet you, Aunty Annette! We promise not to let you down!"*

*'***THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU-**"

And the two MP-Evangelions take off, Annette holding onto Kaworu to keep the sudden wind from tossing her like a rag doll. And then they are gone, and there are only two people and several terrified horses.

"Well," she says, "I leave for a few weeks and you have a girlfriend and you're already a father."

"I think it was inevitable," Kaworu responds, "As you would put it, Kei is just as dorky as I am. We connected. She does remind me of you."

"Yes," Annette says with a shrug, "Well, we are related. And remember how there are things you don't say to people?"

"Saying my friend reminds me of my girlfriend is one?"

"Yes."

"Whoops."

The two begin walking back, at a more sedate pace. Well, that went well. She made what appeared to be a little girl very happy. She also has apparently won the loyalty of nine Evangelions. Not bad for a night's work.

"And Kaworu? I think someone should tell the Second Branch there will be wolves in the hangar."

...

"...really," Asuka says, sitting on the bed across from her, "I'm...not sure I needed to know all this. Wolves. And horses. And...um...huh. W-what happened to his cat?"

"We don't talk about it," Annette says with a wince.

The door opens after a brief knock, Alicia walking in with her hand clamped around Yui's wrist.

"...so I wanted you to talk with her," Alicia says, "If you want to help, then we all need to talk-"

OMEGA, Delta, and another girl in a six year old sized plugsuit crowd at the projector.

"*GRANDMA!"* they shout.

Alicia begins to sputter.

"*Grandma?"* she asks, "They're *six!* And last I checked, Rei and Kei were both six...teen...Yui, what have they been getting up to?"

"Relax," Yui says, shrugging, "They're not *biological,* they're Fork-based AIs based on the neural patterns of one of my eight clone daughters."

Silence blankets the room.

"You're not helping, Aunt Yui," Annette chimes in.

...

When Ichi did make her entrance into NERV that afternoon, she was, as one person pointed out, 'Covered from head to toe in orange juice.'

Not that it was actual orange juice, but actually LCL, which she nonetheless splattered herself in when she learned just the right spot to club, punch, or kick an israfim in.

So by the time that she arrived at the Mausoleum to check in with her father, questions had already circulated to him on what happened.

"I learned how to punch an israfim in the *soul,"* she explains, "I love school."

"Second Branch was normal," Pieter mutters, turning back to the paperwork.

"Hm," Gendo responds.

"It was," Pieter says with a shrug, "It was normal. I mean, I've practically got weird crap happening on a timer, here. Just wait, three seconds and something whacky will happen."

Which is, on cue, when the pillar of light bursts through the floor, tossing Gendo's desk flipping end over end to the other side of the mausoleum, just as the Zophael-griffon rises with Uri holding onto her neck.

...

"So, while Annette and Asuka are searching Shinji's old room, I thought we should have a talk," Yui explains, sitting on the couch opposite her brother and sister in law.

Alicia is still fuming, still seething, but she can tell she's been like that since Annette came home...or more likely, since the attack by the Cherubim on Berlin. And Yui at least agrees with her, that this is, in part, her fault.

"Annette's...stunted," Alicia says, hands wringing, "She barely talks to us. She shuts in her room for most of the day. She doesn't want to see her friends from before she left."

"Well, Kei told me that she's been in contact with several of the AIs," Yui responds, "If that helps, at least. It's...I guess, gradual. She did spend ten years away, after all. It does take time to adjust. There are some things I want to tell you, though."

Reaching into her purse, Yui takes out a folder, opening it and pulling out several forms.

"Well, in return for what Annette's done, NERV is insisting on compensating," Yui explains, "First off, this is an open scholarship to any college. NERV foots the bill. We're also footing the bill for tutoring, after school, and anything else needed to get Annette on track regarding Kanji with her peers, although she is fluent in German, English, and some Russian dialects."

Alicia looks over the papers, lips a tight line.

"Is this a bribe?" Tomoe asks, "Are you bribing us, Yui?"

"No, I'm twisting the administration of NERV to fix my mistake," she responds, "The official story is that Annette was the backup pilot for the Mark-06. I looked over plug telemetry from when the Cherubim attacked Berlin, and she could, possibly pilot. She'd just need ten years of training, which she's not going to receive. And instead, she's going to receive ten years of back pay."

Taking out another folder, she hands it to Tomoe. Opening it, the younger brother of the head of Project E takes out the paper and receipt, staring at it. And then tilting his head.

"Uh...that's...that's a lot of zeroes..."

Alicia grabs the receipt out of his hand. She stares at it, eyes frozen and fixed, before stuffing it back into the envelope.

"Okay," she says, "This is nice. I just to know one thing, Yui. *Why?*"

...

The room, the room her boyfriend spent the formative years of his life in, is not anything special. In fact, it is a typical room. With a bed, a desk, and a book shelf. It is about the size of his room at Misato's old, wrecked apartment, which could probably explain one of the reasons he decided to give up his room for her. That and he was also being nice, kind, and sweet. Which also helps.

"So," Annette says, padding along the floor in her slippers and bathrobe, "Shinji's old SDAT player should be somewhere around here."

Asuka nods, walking past Annette and tapping her wrist. Her omnitool appears, summoned from the storage she keeps it in, linked to the PDA she has in her skirt pocket. As the steady orange glow runs over the walls of the room.

"Neat," Annette says, "I could use one of those."

"One of a k-kind, unfortunately," she responds, a thin beam of orange pointing to the underside of the bed, "Ah, there. I keyed it into the numbers on the s-serial code. From there, it scans the room and finds them."

"Again, I say: Neat."

Walking over to the bed, Asuka bends down, flopping onto her stomach and reaching underneath the simple, wood framed bed. Grabbing onto something, she pulls, pulling out a large storage box, flat but wide, similar to tupperware but opaque.

"So," Annette says, "I keep in regular contact with the Nine. Meg was talking with me today because one of her 'Doggies' has been getting sick all over the hangar. We think it ate a burger wrapper."

Asuka nods, opening the case. On the top, most visible, is a small, old, white and red SDAT player. Picking it up gently, daintily, she examines it, turning it end over end as she stares at the goal of the trip. And in all honesty finds nothing unique, special, or in any way celebratory.

"So, why'd you need that?"

"It's f-from Naoko Akagi's notes," Asuka responds, "We're trying to find out why she b-built Rei. This is one of the clues."

Opening the player, she finds a well used tape inside it, scribblings on it marking it as a going away present, and the handwriting to not be Yui's.

"S-DAT Tapes can be used for audio and data recording," Asuka explains, "It means Dr. Akagi p-probably stored some sort of message on it."

"I thought they discontinued that."

"M-meaning you'd need specialized equipment to play it back," Asuka responds with a nod, "Makes sense. No one could find it accidentally.

Even Shinji, who p-probably listened to it all the time."

Closing the SDAT, she places it in her pocket, and turns back to the case. And then her head begins to tilt, slowly, as she looks at the stacked magazine and Annette walks over.

"Oh, good," Annette says with a smile, "That must be his porn collection. I smell *blackmail.*"

...

"The reason I sent Annette to Germany was never to spy," Yui explains, "I let her believe she spying for me. Any information she actually fed me was already given to me in more detail by any actual agents, and it kept her visible enough that people knew there was a connection between me and her, keeping her safe. The real reason I sent her to Germany was because of Kaworu Nagisa."

"The boy she grew up with," Alicia says, "Is he...like Rei and Kei?"

"No," Yui responds, shaking her head, "Kaworu is an Angel. He was artificially created by Chairman Kihl as a modified clone of himself. He was going to be used by Kihl in a...ritual...which would wipe out all life on Earth and turn him into a god."

A hand rises.

"Yes, Tomoe?"

"What the *fuck?*" he asks, "Are making this up?"

"No."

"You're telling me that our *daughter* was babysitting an *Angel* and a *supervillain.* How does this sound *sane?* What were you *thinking?*"

Tomoe's face does not turn red or fluster, his gaze remaining steady through the rant.

"Well," Yui says, clearing her throat, "This doesn't sound good, I will admit. But, I sent Annette over because I thought something could be done. Annette befriended Kaworu. Because of this, Kaworu has developed in a way that Kihl did not anticipate, and eventually turned on him and turned on the other Angels. Now he's taken Kihl's old position. More or less, Annette managed to save the world by being

his friend."

The door opens. Pale, hands clammy, Asuka walks into the living room, clutching the SDAT player.

"Asuka?" Yui asks, standing up, "Is something wrong?"

"N-no," she says, "N-nothing. At all. Ready t-to go when you are, Dr. Ikari."

...

The lift comes to a stop, and Shinji Ikari thrusts his hands into his pockets and walks out, walking down the hallway to his father's office. Ichi hasn't checked in, and given that she probably would head here after her first day of school, he decided to see how his little sister was doing and what she broke during her first day.

"Hey, Dad?" he asks, opening the door, "Has Ichi-"

His answer comes in the form of a massive claw of gold light which wraps around his head, or more in particular his entire torso, silencing him as Zophael uses the opening to charge out of office, through the elevator, through the elevator cabin, and dive down the elevator shaft.

"**Trust me!**" Zophael yells, "**This is the best plan!**"

Running out of the office, holding the pistol which nonetheless turned out to be ineffectual against a Cherubim, Gendo swears.

"Damn it," he growls, "It has Shinji. Pilot! Sohryu! We have to cut it off at the Cages! Alert Section 2 and Section 1 that the Cherubim's loose in the base!"

Skidding to a halt next to Gendo, the Sub Director growls and cocks the shotgun again.

"What about you?"

Loading up a fresh clip, Gendo pushes his glasses back up his nose.

"I'm getting my boy back," he says, "Iti! Let's go!"

Grabbing him by the collar, Iti bounches off her feet, before the two of them disappear into the ventilation duct.

"Yeah," Pieter says, "Second branch was *normal.*"

Chapter 93: Weaponized Tsundere

Alarms blare, shrill and through the air. The stairwell doors open and staff are given a moment to get out of the way as Pieter runs out, Ichi and 00-EM on his trail as Pieter activates the speaker functions of his PDA. Speakers throughout the base come to life, Sohryu's voice blaring through them.

"This is Sub Director Sohryu to all staff!" he announces, "For those of you who have encountered Zophael, you should now be regaining memories of her! She has infiltrated the base and has kidnapped Pilot Ikari! All hands to battle stations, and seal off the base!"

"I repeat: The Cherubim is a Spy! And she's sapping our pilots!"

Chapter 93:

Weaponized Tsundere

"Great plan."

"Shut up."

"No, really. I honestly couldn't have thought of a better plan."

"Shut up shut up!"

"You sure you copied Asuka? Because this is the sort of thought out, well planned escape that I'm sure only my mother could think of."

"Shut it, Ikari! You're lucky you're part of my great escape plan!"

"Which somehow involves us going deeper into NERV. Right."

The glowing tsundere Griffon glares at him, landing in the dimly lit corridor, the holes burnt through the many armor layers still glowing gold as she stomps onward, still holding Shinji in her paw.

"So, can I offer advice?" he asks, "I mean, since you could probably use a sounding board for escaping."

"No!" Zophael barks, **"No you may not! Now, I've got to find a way out of this stupid base while being chased by your stupid sisters**

and your stupid coworkers! So you stay in this room, which I add has no stupid air vents, until I come for your stupid ass!"

Forcing the door to the room open, she shoves Shinji inside, closing it behind her.

Standing in the pitch black, dark room, Shinji sighs, scratching his head as he looks at the surface of the door, of what he thinks is probably one of the most secure rooms at NERV. Or at least, until the room glows faint red, and sees the reflection of two blood red, glowing eyes on the mirror polished door.

"**Ikari-kun.**"

...

"Iti."

The green highlighted Ayanami stops, turning to her companion in vent crawling. Thankfully, she has restricted herself to the larger of the ducts. While slower, her father is unable to navigate the more...specialized spaces. And if he saw how they did so, she's not sure he would be able to comprehend.

"Yes?"

"Why are we in the ductwork?"

"The Cherubim uses her AT Fields to affect memories," Iti responds, "I'm maintaining an AT Field to counter hers, but you will be affected. It is confusing. Possibly disorienting."

"I see. Continue on."

She nods, and they continue, silently.

...

"I'll freely admit I'm having trouble taking any of this in, Yui. But I think I'm just more glad that my daughter's back home."

Nodding, Yui squeezes the hand of her sister in law. Tomoe is standing back, but he's never been the type to get between his sister and his

wife during a conversation. It's never been wise, or at least good for his mental health.

"So, I want to make this up," Yui says, "And, since you both have some time off, I'd like you to come to Tokyo-3 and spend some time with us. We have an apartment right by our own which is empty, so you don't need to rent a hotel room, and we'd love to see you."

Alicia sighs, nodding.

"That's probably for the best," she responds, "We'll think about it. But I think...I think Annette would like to visit. And I honestly haven't spent nearly enough times with my nieces and nephews, and Shinji doesn't write to us that much."

Yui nods. She hasn't told them that Shinji isn't technically completely human anymore. Something else she will have to tell them. Or that Uri is an Angel. Or about Ichi.

That can wait.

"Good," Yui says, "Asuka, let's-"

The car starts up, parked in the driveway of the house. Sitting in the driver's seat, Asuka folds her arms as Yui walks over. Only to be met by Asuka raising a single coin.

"F-flip you for it."

...

"Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit SHIT!"

The first attempt to, as the Lilim put it, 'case the joint', was less than successful. At least she didn't run into Uri again, who was acting so pissed off just because she accidentally mind-raped his mother. Well, actually, she's not sure if that's good or not, because while Uri was, well, being a dick just because of that, she ran into someone else.

Which is why the swearing, yelling glowing griffon runs, pockmarks running along the wall as they miss her by a hairs breadth. The pockmarks are from bullets the side of a human's index finger, and the source of this hail of bullets, covered from head to toe in the gunmetal gray, blue lined SUIT, continues to yell through her mouth piece,

holding the Minigun in one hand and the ammo drum in the other.

As it turns out, mind-fuckery is a *sensitive* subject to one Mana Kirishima.

"Come on, baby!" she yells, "Cry some more!"

Leading Zophael through the rounds, she chases her via gunfire straight into the corner of the storage room, laying on fire just as the Cherubic griffon slams into the wall. Laughing, yelling, Mana unloads the normally vehicle-mounted heavy weapon onto the Angel, smoke, debris, and vaporized metal and rock filling the air...

Which is then dispersed by a flashing orange octagon that hovers in front of the bird thing.

"Oh, crap," Mana says.

"Whoops. Truth be told, this is the first time I've been in a fight."

The griffon advances. Depressing the trigger, Mana is rewarded with the loud, repeating *click* sound that signals that she is, in fact, out of bullets. Flipping the gun, she brings it back like a club and swings...

Only for it to deflect off of Zophael's AT Field, right before she grabs Mana with one massive claw and begins repeatedly slamming her into the metal floor.

...

The car speeds down the highway. She pouted for a few minutes after losing the coin toss, but nonetheless went with it because probability cannot be denied, even after going through the rigorous steps of determining the coin was neither weighted, fixed, or otherwise rigged. And hence Yui flips through her emails as Asuka drives.

"S-so, Dr. Ikari?" Asuka asks, checking the rear view mirror to confirm that, yes, the Section 2 escort is right behind them, "Can I ask something?"

"Sure."

"Wh-what was it like, raising the Ree?"

"It was...an experience. The thing about the Ree is that all eight of

them are highly intelligent and curious. So, what would normally end up being ways to occupy them would also end up being complex scientific experiments. Like the lever exercise."

"The...what?"

"It's a simple experiment," Yui says with a smile, "There's a lever on a desk. When you pull the lever, you receive a static shock. The experiment is a personality test, because it sees what stimulus a person responds to. I found that the Ree all had a strikingly different reaction to the experiment. But, they all had a similar reaction to me, which was to pull the lever at least a second time to check for the causation and correlation of the static shock."

Asuka pauses. She purses her lips.

"W-wouldn't it make more sense to *not* pull the lever a second time?"

Yui pauses, this time.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Asuka," she responds, and sips her coffee.

"B-but if you're going to get a shock, why would you pull the lever a s-second time?"

"To check for the connection between the lever and the shock, clearly," Yui responds, "Each of them had a different reaction, which did give some hint of how their personalities would develop. Nana kept pulling the lever even after I disconnected the power cord, and eventually wrenched it out of the socket. We didn't know how she was still getting shocked. May have been an AT Field. Kei started to disassemble the device, and I'm not sure what she was going to make but it's probably a good thing we stopped her."

"Um..."

"Kiko figured out a way to use the electricity to stimulate muscles and cause a human body to reflexively embrace something. Iti drew up a chart of the circuit with scribbled in suggestions to increase current. And Zyuu..."

She continues talking for a solid hour on variances, stimulus, coordination and repeat experiments. Conditions for the experiment. Repeat experiments. Variants of how many times a lever can be pulled. All the time she is talking, the same sequence of events keeps

repeating in Asuka's head, that of Yui, her boss, her role model, repeatedly yanking on a lever which repeatedly, without fail, shocks her. And all her daughters lined up to take their turns with the shock stick.

All of it in scientific jargon. Correlation, causation, conditionals, experimental, observation and repetition, which all leads to one main conclusion.

"B-but you're being *electrocuted,*" Asuka interjects, "Wouldn't common sense tell you to not pull a lever that is going to *shock* you?"

"...lost me again there, Asuka."

And once again, for the second time this trip, Asuka finds her assessment of Yui Ikari's sanity being adjusted downward.

...

"**Ikari-kun.**"

Midway through the five minutes he spent scratching at the door, Shinji realized that Lilith was not moving. In fact, in the darkness, illuminated by her glowing red eyes, he could see that she tied to a large diagnostic bed, propped upward, her hands and arms restrained in a fashion similar to how her larger body once was on its cross.

"**Come closer.**"

He turns to her, the restrained jouten of the progenitor.

"Yeah," he says, "Uh...no."

The white skinned, obviously naked 14 year old girl pulls at the restraints, the wires and monitoring devices covering up the obvious nudity. She frowns, an odd expression on her usually placid face.

"**Come closer. You have questions. I possess answers.**"

"Does your answering those questions involve you turning me into orange drink?"

"**...that is not untrue.**"

"Then again, *no.*"

Lilith frowns, again. This should be much easier than this. At least, that is what Shinji thinks that she thinks, looking at the confused, maybe frustrated expression on her face. But he has trouble knowing the mind of the ancestor of all life, and direct ancestor of the Ree.

"Okay," he says, "I do have some questions."

"**And you would trust my answers? Why would I not lie, if it would bring you closer to me?**"

"I...uh...assumed, since the girls don't lie and Mom does, and they might..."

"**You assume there is a genetic predisposition to lying and honesty?**"

He shuffles his feet, scratching the back of his head. Yes, he muses. When the inhuman splinter of a godlike being says that your idea was stupid, it does merit reason that the idea was stupid.

"**Speak, Ikari-kun."**

"...I had a vision, a sort of...I guess dream during the last Angel," he says, "Do you know anything about that?"

"**I am but a part of the greater whole. I am an aspect, not the entirety of Lilith. But I, too, saw. It was a memory. Another step in a cycle."**

"I saw...Angels. Not just the type we fight, but...can you make Angels, too?"

Lilith turns to Shinji. A small smile crosses her face.

"**Of course I can.**"

He nods. Tapping his foot, he considers his next question.

"Are the Ree your Angels?"

...

"All personnel report that they're at stations. MAGI confirms turrets are coming on line and all personnel at secure bunkers. NERV is at A-18 level lockdown."

"Meaning?" Misato asks, walking onto Dogma as the Big Screen clicks on, showing a layout of NERV-1 in 3D wireframe.

"Meaning we're classifying this as a full Invasion," Pieter responds, "We have a Cherubim in the base, and Mana's engaged it. It's using telepathy and AT Fields to mess with our minds and infiltrate. It's a shapeshifter and highly dangerous."

He turns, from the empty on high station where Ikari would direct things, to the screen and the waiting technicians. After the last debacle, he had some surprises installed.

"Thankfully, if we don't send people after her, she can't mess with their heads," he says, and smirks, "Activate the defense grid."

...

Ichi sprints down the stairs five at a time, a Lil'Shinji doll dangling from her hand.

"My, you've grown since the last time we did something together," 00-Em remarked, idly.

Ichi snorts, her breathing completely unaffected by the mechanical exertion. "Yep! Six years, in fact."

The subjectively-five-years old AI made an interested noise. "How is 'being 12' going for you, incidentally?"

"Awesome."

"Ah. That's nice to know, that I have something to look forwards to." 00-Em tilts his head. "Relaying optimal route to your internal map. If you are heading down to the Eva launch bays."

"Thanks! I am!"

The virtual avatar of 00-Em, its face overlaying the Lil'Shinji doll, raised its eyebrows. "You know you're still locked down?" he asks.

The brown-haired girl nodded. "Yep. But from the launch bays, we can get to pretty much anywhere really quickly, so I can cut her off, and save Shinji." She winced as she saw the door up ahead was locked, and skipped to a stop. Only for the door to open itself.

"Hurry up!" the little boy orders. "I'll get the doors for you!"

"Wow." Ichi was impressed, and said so. "Are you hacking the doors?"

"Not quite, there's not an internal wireless system controlling them, so I'm instead backending a standard protocol which Naok00 implemented which... yes, I am."

"Cool. You're a really useful adorable woobieish lockpick, you know," said Ichi, getting back into her pace. "I mean, that's a real difference I think, being 12. Back when I was six, you were just a boy a bit younger than me. Now you're all huggable, but you're also really useful."

"I'm charmed. I think."

"And you could fit in my backpack when I go to school, too, so I'd never had to open a door again... oh, but do 12 year old girls still carry around dolls? I think I'll have to ask Mum; I don't think Rei would know."

"You know I can't do this to purely mechanical doors, right?"

...

A pitch, and Mana is sent through the wall, through an armor layer, and rolling to a stop with a groan in the middle of the storage room. Flipping back up to her feet, she cracks her knuckles. Hidden compartments in her SUIT's arms fold out, mini rocket launchers unfolding as the wall bursts and Zophael charges out.

Raising her arm, she aims to fire...

Which is right when the glowing griffon leaps over her and through the wall.

"Fuck!" Mana yells, "Get back here you glowing winged bitch!"

Swinging her legs out from under her, her hands grab the floor and she flips herself up. Servos in her battlesuit whir and she takes off in a run, chasing after the galloping creature.

Leaping, she grabs Zophie by the tail, digging her heels into the ground as Zophie yelps. Turning, her eyes glow, and an AT Field slices through the air.

And Mana's right arm clatters to the ground.

Mana screams, curses, swears, yelling as she lets go over Zophael's tail as she grabs at the coolant-spewing part of her suit as the metal closes. She stomps her feet, biting her lip as Zophael turns, tilting her head.

"**Are you alright-**"

Her question is cut short when Mana's fist swings into her face. Leaping upon her, Mana brings her fist down on Zophael's beak, laughing as the Cherubim stumbles back, clawing at the air as she yells out and swears tectonic oaths, before her AT Field flashes again and Mana's other arm goes flying.

Tossing the screaming Mana off of her face, Zophie pins her to the floor with her claw, shaking her head, clearing her vision.

"**Okay! I'm sorry I cut your arms off, but you're done! Fighting! Is! Concluded! Why don't you just lie down and not bleed out so-**"

She is interrupted once again when Mana brings her legs up, a compartment in her right knee opening up. A flash of electricity and a projectile traveling at 8000 feet per second impacts Zophie's face, burning the air and sending the cherubim stumbling back, screaming and swearing.

"**Why the fuck do you have a mass driver in your leg?"**

"In case some fucker cut off my arms! Which you just did!"

Mana flips back up, an impressive feet of acrobatics when lacking arms, and promptly kicks Zophie in the face. The cherubim stumbles back, yelling, swatting at Mana, who ducks and bobs.

"C'mon! C'mon, bitch! Let's see what ya got!"

"**Stop it!"**

"Oh, don't want to fight a cripple do you? Just fine throwing around a girl!"

"**You don't have any arms!"**

"I can turn off my nerves! It's only a flesh wound!"

Another kick to the face, followed by another. Zophael's eyes flash once again, and Mana's legs below the knees fall off, the girl cursing

again.

"**Now what're you gonna do? BLEED on me?**"

Her answer comes in the ceiling disintegrating in a burst of flame, as the red clad figure, with halo and flaming wings and sword descends.

"*ZOPHAEL!*"

"...**fuck!**"

And Zophael takes off in a run, Uri in quick pursuit.

...

Throughout the corridors, plates open. Turrets, speaking with cheerful voices fold out of the walls, greeting passerbys while painting the walls in red targeting lasers. Missile launches fold out, high energy plasma cannons extending at corners and folding out of the floor. The corridors of NERV-1 become armed things, entire swaths of the base arming themselves against the intruder.

"Defense grid is online and powered up," Aoba reports, "Targeting sensors tied in with MAGI logorhythms."

"Angel tracked and found," Makoto announces, "Targeting sensors locked. Ready on your command, Director."

Pieter raises his hand, index and middle finger extended.

"Three...two...one..."

A small shift in the air. The MAGI registers the field, briefly.

"And shutdown."

"Defense grid returning to standby," Makoto responds, "All systems check out. Test successful."

...

The doors to Cage 2 open. Despite the fact that she should be with Dr. Ikari in Okayama, the technicians maintaining Zwei are not in the

least surprised to find Asuka running into the cage. Well, mostly not surprised, as their lack of surprise is not of their own doing, but the subtle AT Field which is messing with their perceptions and low level memories.

They are surprised, however, as the figure wrapped in blazing golden light bursts through the wall, flaming greatsword in one hand. Zophael stumbles back, skittering backwards as Uriel lands in front of her. Beneath the halo of light and the wings of flame, his face twists into a snarl.

"U-Uri," she stutters, "Y-you have to calm d-down!"

"*How DARE you use my sister's face!"* Uri roars, bringing the sword back for a finishing blow-

"**MASTER!"**

And then Zwei's fist, with Uri flat up against the knuckles, slams into the many layered armored wall. There is a pained groan from the barely conscious Dominion, and 'Asuka' hops over the wrist of the Eva, blowing him a kiss.

"Good boy!"

And then she shifts back into her glowing griffon form and runs out. Zwei's head, the massive construction that it is, tilts as it watches her go.

"...**ANGEL?"**

...

"So...why me? Why are you focused on me?"

"Many reasons. You seem to be a...center that many revolve around. You have seen my opposite in His base form."

"ADAM?"

"**As you refer to Him as."**

"Okay," Shinji says, back up against the door, as much distance as he can put between him and Lilith, "Well...that's better than I hoped, I guess."

"**Explain.**"

"Well...well, I mean..." he chuckles, scratching the back of his head, "I mean, I thought you were attracted to me. I have no idea why, but that happens way too often-"

"**That is not...untrue.**"

"...great."

...

Two sets of eyes watch from the ventilation grate above the Cage. They watch the scene unfold, and continue watching as Zwei retracts his fist, revealing a largely unhurt, but still swearing Uri.

"Odd," Gendo says, "Isn't Asuka with Yui?"

"It's the Cherubim, Dad," Iti responds, "Try to remember. Uses AT Field to alter memories. Gave Dr. Sohryu a seizure."

She winces. Then smiles.

"Rei. Your call."

...

Panting, the griffon skids to a stop. The sounds of screaming and yelling and pursuit have died down. Resting on her haunches, Zophael takes deep breathes, beak opening and clothing with every pant.

"**Okay. I think...I think...I lost them.**"

Two eyes open in the darkness, blood red. Surrounding them, another eight open. Then around them, thirty two blood colored orbs open, behind Zophael, flattened against the pitch black wall, providing a steady crimson glow in the isolated corner.

"*Heee~ey.*"

...

"Sub Director! Blue Pattern's detected! It's inside the base and MAGI reports that Rei is right next to it!"

Snapping back to attention, Pieter glances at Misato, and back at the Big Screen.

"Rei!" Misato yells, "We're reading an Angel right at your position! Are you alright-"

The line crackles, followed by a womanly, terrified scream. There is an edge to it, a nonhumanness to it, which makes them wince.

"*Say it!*" Rei shouts, "*SAY IT!"*

"YOU'RE THE ULTIMATE LIFE FORM! YOU'RE THE ULTIMATE LIFE FORM!"

The line goes silent, once more.

"Rei," Misato says, "Is the *Angel* alright?"

The ceiling vent opens, and two figures drop down. Gendo and Iti land in a crouch, both straightening up and smoothing out their uniforms in mirrored actions.

"We still haven't located Shinji," Gendo says, "But we have a plan for the Angel. Rei has it in custody, and here's what we're going to do..."

...

"*Sooo~oooo...hungry?"*

More inarticulate screaming. Rei hates it when she has to use her tentacles to gag someone, especially someone who reminds her of her bestest best friend. But, Zophie's memory messing only effects humans. And right now, she's not human.

"*I know! We can get something to eat from the vending machine. Sandwich restores all health!"*

More screaming. Rei sighs through her many mouths. Zophie's a real wuss for an Angel. It's kinda disappointing, because she's sure that if Asuka was an Angel, at very least she'd bite at her or something.

Maybe she should try that. But if she does that, Shinji and Little

Mommy would get all upset. So she shouldn't. It wouldn't be responsible.

And Responsible Rei is Responsible.

"*Sooo~ooo we should talk. 'Cause I know you're just scared, not evil or stuff. Sooo I had an idea. I'm gonna help you escape, as long as you promise not to mess with our memories again, and maybe even help you out, 'cause we're all trying to survive. An' just like Naok00 says, when you got an experiment to run, you just keep on tryin' till you run out of cake.*"

Third and eighteenth mouths drool. Cake. She could use some cake.

"*Anyway. That's what we're gonna do. 'Kay?*"

Screams. Whimpers.

"*Is that a yes?*"

...

"So, why us?" Shinji asks, pacing the room, keeping distance between himself and the restrained Lilith as he does so, "Why my family? Why us?"

"**I have always watched you,**" Lilith responds, "**I have found myself drawn to your family.**"

"Always?"

He pauses. Turns to her.

"What do you mean, always? How long have you watched my family? I mean...you mean my mother?"

"Yes. I have...watched her. Influenced her. I saw that she would be necessary to break the cycle. Which is why I, or to be correct that which I am spoke to her when she attempted to sacrifice herself."

"...what?"

"**I spoke to her. Told her the consequences of sacrifice to my other half. She made a decision, and did not sacrifice herself. This has changed many possibilities.**"

"So...you were responsible for Mom not dying when I was four?"

"**No. I merely provided perspective. The decision was, in the end, Yui Ikari's.**"

He nods. Scratches his head, grinds his teeth.

"Why?"

"**Come closer. I will show you.**"

"Yeah, no."

"**Curses.**"

...

It was poorly lit down in the Eva bays, the Units still not prepped. The bay where the Mark 01 would have been was conspicuously empty, Ichi's main body being in lockdown. As a result, no-one noticed the twelve-year old girl and the Lil'Shinji doll lurking by one of the control panels.

Ichi levered open the front, casually twisting the metal out of the way. "What can you do?" she asked.

"Hmm." The little doll paused, and casually ripped open his stomach, cable-intestines spilling out.

"You filled your gut with cables?" Ichi asks, tilting her head. "I never thought of doing that. I just use my finger-ports."

The Lil'Shinji shrugs, hands sorting through the mess of connectors. "Not much space in this body," 00-Em remarked, idly. "USB... firewire... ahah! Inlink-3! Yes, it's a custom modification from Duae," he explained, standing on tip-toes and sticking the connector into the port. "Not everything is wireless and they don't standardise these things. Okay... spoofing Grandmother's command code... ooh, she's changed the password. Right, by prior precedent... 1T1706C616E7473 should do it... heh." The light flashed green. "And there it is."

Ichi blinked. "Wha?"

The doll of her brother and pilot smirked up at her. "If I told you that the previous one was R31726F6D616E6365? Well, I'll leave that as a

puzzle for you. Go on, Aunty Ichi! You have to rescue Uncle Shinji from the big mean Cherub! I've done my thing, now you do what you do best. Which from the available evidence, is messily tearing apart Angels. And anyone who'd try to take Uncle Shinji deserves to die! He's one of my positive male role models!"

"Yeah, that is a fun bit, the ripping and the tearing and the shredding? Aren't you coming?" Ichi smiled. "I might have doors I need to open."

"This body isn't properly EM-shielded, unlike yours. I'd just fry myself if I tried it." The lights in the eyes dimmed and relit. "This thing is basically just a toy. Your body is awesome," he commented.

"I know," Ichi grinned. With a skip and a vault, she leaps over the side, rolling on impact, and sprinted over to her empty Eva launch bay, leaving the burning rubber of the soles of her shoes behind her. "And so am I."

"You are. If I wasn't a boy, and therefore not a girl, I'd want to be you." The little boy's voice dropped. "My sisters would have liked you," he said, softly.

Ichi raised one finger, paused, and darted back, grabbing a fire extinguisher. "Safety's all important," she said, her voice lilting.

"I can't see what's safe about... oh, yes." There was a predatory grin on the boy's face. "Tracking internal sensors. She's just about to enter the chute system, so... ready?"

"Yep." Ichi flexed her fingers, forming a fist with one hand while she grabbed onto the rail with the other. "I'll be back."

"Hmm," the boy said to himself. "Now, what would Ivy do in these circumstances?"

...

The AT Field pushes the technicians out of the way, as Zophie ascends, past the technicians, into the empty Cage -05 and flying up the launch chute to Tokyo-3, freedom, and possibly another chance to observe the Lilim and make her own conclusions. In retrospect, the entire episode was more than a little stupid.

Especially her attempts at escape. But, she muses, at least she is

escaping now. She is finally getting away, finally finding her way out of here. Just something about 'making it look good' and 'owing her' from Rei when she gave her a map to get out. Although, Zophie thinks, she can't help but feel that she's not out of the woods yet.

"*ICHI LAUNCH!"*

"**Wait, isn't it Eva Laun-**"

Accelerated via the rail catapults, Ichi's avatar body, on fire thanks to the friction, flies fist first into Zophie's glowing griffon midsection. Or, as her sisters instructed her in the careful play by play they walked her through, straight in the womb.

"**Aw GOD! WHY DID I HAVE THAT ORGAN?"**

"Face fiery pummeling justice, Angel!"

Another two punches to the face, and Zophie grabs the on fire avatar, grinding her against the railing as she continues flying up. Ichi simply flips under the claw, running up Zophie's arm and jump kicking her in the beach.

"**Stop it! STOP IT!"**

"Never! Angel Slaying is a proud Ikari tradition!"

The AT Field of the Angel is failing, mainly due to the efforts of her seven sisters who decided that, outside of her Eva, Ichi needs to get an Angel win of her own. Swinging her left hand, the AT Field of Zophie flares and the hand disintegrates. Which doesn't both Ichi at all, which is what Zophie sees when the crystal folds out of the now exposed wrist and releases a gout of plasma.

"**AAAAAHHHHH! What the _? Why in f_s sake do you have that?"**

"Because I'm *awesome!"*

Now fully on fire, Ichi latches onto the wildly flying griffon. The punching continues up until Zophie finally clears the exit, where there is a flash of light, a sound akin to a crystal shattering, and the now skinless avatar body drops down towards NERV once more.

And something continues on, towards Tokyo-3 itself.

...

"Okay," Shinji says, "Think. Think. I'm starting to stare at the ceiling and wonder how I can weaponize it, which means that Lilith's bringing out my Ree traits again. If I can somehow get a signal out to the rest of NERV, I can probably get someone to open the door and get me out of here."

He sighs, arms folded, staring at the door.

"**Ikari.**"

"Not now," he sighs, "Look, I'm glad you gave me some answers, but right now I need to get out."

"**Ikari.**"

"There has to be some way to jury rig the door. They have to have planned for some way to get people out of here. I mean, it only makes sense that they planned for people getting trapped-"

"**Ikari.**"

He whirls about, mouth open to yell at the restrained Lilith. Except, as he finds out, the restraints are loose and open. And Lilith is standing in front of him, a demure smile on her face.

"Oh, son of a Bi-"

...

"So," Pieter says, sitting at the desk, sitting in front of the assembled Ree and pilots, "Well...okay, here's my first question. Girls, you built Ichi's body. Why does she have a plasma cannon in the 40 watt range?"

Skin and clothes burnt off, the metal endoskeleton roughly proportional to a 12 year old girl shrugs, smiling. Well, appearing to smile, as all the teeth are exposed.

"Why wouldn't she have a plasma cannon?" Nana observes, voices the unvoiced response of the rest of the Ree.

"Okay, we get her fixed up," Pieter sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, "Before Dr. Ikari gets back. Rei, did Zophael tell you where Shinji was?"

"Yep," Rei says, lolling back and forth on her heels.

"Great. Go with Katsuragi and get him. Someone get Kaji on the horn and tell him what happened to Mana and...what's the estimate on getting her arms and legs reattached?"

"About two days," Gendo responds, "The cuts were clean. Sohryu is attending to her."

"Good," Pieter responds, "So let's get to work. Then, thing'll be back to normal."

...

And deep in Sheol, down at the lowest level before Terminal Dogma, there is an expanding puddle of yellowish, viscous fluid. At the center of the expanding puddle is a pair of pants, shoes, and socks. The shirt, however, is now worn by the white skinned, red eyed girl sitting at the center of the room.

And she smiles.

Chapter 94: Stick It In

The world coalesces. He sees the frothing yellow streams, the sun high in the sky like a red, unblinking eye. He's reasonably sure the world has never looked like this. Hiding lakes of LCL or a sun that resembles Lilith's eye would be beyond even his mother's ability to cover up.

Then he blinks, and the world is normal. He stands on a bridge over a blue stream. To his right, there is a town, a small little city dominated by the white capped mountain in the distance. It reminds of Tokyo-3. But, then again, he remembers that the city he's called home lately was built over a smaller town.

Hakone, right?

He sees the hotels, the onsens in the distance, scratching his head as he sees the larger city in the further distance. He guesses that may be Tokyo itself, the original city before it was destroyed following Second Impact.

Which is when he wonders why he's coming to these conclusions. He's never had the head for science the rest of his family does, but he does tend to go with gut instinct. His gut is telling him that he last remembers Lilith smiling. Lilith smiling is a bad thing. So he's guessing he got absorbed by her, but for a reason.

He turns, to get a view of the rest of the area. What strikes him is the fact that he's standing in the middle of a road. What also strikes him is a white sedan, which does literally strike him, pitching him forward against the hood to see his pale, blue haired reflection in the windshield before he bounces off the front bumper and is tossed to the pavement.

Groaning, thankful that he is still not entirely human- or he might have been killed. Again- Shinji Ikari manages to keep his eyes open as the doors open and two people frantically run over.

"Is he alright?" a voice which is familiar but still somewhat alien to him says, looking up to see a woman in her middle ages bent over him, black, straight hair framing her face, familiar blue eyes staring at him.

Then another face, which looks very much like Rei's, a teenage girl who's face is frantic looking over him.

"I think so, Mom," the girl says, "Oh crap. Oh *crap*. This isn't good!"

"Hitting someone with a car usually isn't, but let's get him home so your father can take a look at him. Then we'll call a hospital."

He elicits a groan in agreement.

"Well, at least he's awake," the woman says, "Can you hear me? What's your name?"

"Shinji," he groans.

"Shinji, my name is Misao Ikari. We're going to get you some help."

She turns, to the girl. Her daughter.

"Yui, help me get him in the car."

Yep, Shinji thinks, that confirms it. Lilith has apparently sent him *back in time.*

Chapter 94: Stick It In

To describe it as dark or pitch would be a misleading statement. Instead, think of it as a void- the colorless landscape only because there is not powerful light source. Well, save for the one she finds when she appears, the mass of white and red, drifting in the ether in perpetual dream-state. The Giant of Light, white mixed with red and black, does notice her as she drifts past Him, but does not react. Only a single, half lidded black spot upon the face before Lilly drifts past, trilling.

When she went to visit Mari, upon Pieter's request, she found herself detoured. Instead, she finds herself here, in the ether, in the world between universes, floating past the being she realizes is her grandfather. Unfortunately, he does not seem to be the type to lavish attention on his progeny like the rest of her friends do.

Ah. There you are.

O.o?

It starts as an outline, blossoming into a shape like a flower, then a tree. Eyes numerous as fruit upon it look down upon Lilly, as the shape of the being of light folds out like a fractal snowflake.

I greet you, Leliel the Second.

I have summoned you from the world

To speak to you

And convey to you the message that

You must carry to others.

Lilly makes a faint cooing sound. She trills, as the Tree of Life envelops her, carrying her away from the sleeping giant, past the infinite explosion. And as they travel further and further, Lilly once more finds her voice.

"...**who are you...?**"

I am the Tree of Life.

Awakened in the Aeons before

As were you

And our sisters and brothers

But as I have waited

For the end to this war

Others have not been so

Understanding

As you.

I am the Tool of God

Angel of Plantlife

I am Cahethal

And one of the Seraphim.

Like you.

...

ALERT

AT FIELD DETECTED

BLOOD PATTERN TYPE BLUE: CONFIRMED

23rd Angel: CONFIRMED.

"Status!" Pieter yells, running onto Central Dogma, "What've we got?"

The big screen powers up, flashing on to display the massive shape approaching Tokyo-3.

"Blue Pattern picked up 120 kilometers outside of Tokyo-3 and closing in fast," Maya announces, "MAGI confirms it's a Cherubim."

The image flickers in, an outline first as the projectors in the ceiling form into a three dimensional image. First that appears is the ten translucent wings, running the length of the curved, sectioned body.

Next they see the eight legs ending in sharpened, nail like points. The back of the body tapers off, curling inward, a dripping spike pointing down and inward. The head is covered in eight eyes, red and unblinking, its face opened vertically, twitching mandibles and claw like teeth rolling with every breath of the massive being.

"It's an Angelic Bee," Aoba says, "My God."

You are, all of you, garbage.

You have reigned victorious against my brethren

But you have become complacent and weak.

You become soft in your own victories.

But I do not seek victory.

I only seek to watch you squirm.

I am the Chief of the Powers.

Angel of Joy.

I am Camael.

I am here.

...

"Oh, what the *Hell,*" Yui says, staring at the young lady behind the desk, who shrinks behind her computer as she explains the problem, "Swipe it again!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ikari," the young lady says, sheepishly swiping the card again, "But the card isn't authorizing. Have you checked with your company that you can put a room on it?"

"Of course they authorized it, I *am* the company!"

"Have you called them?"

"No..."

"Did you clear the use of a company credit card?"

"No," Yui says, and grimaces, "Crap. No, I didn't. So I can't put a room on my NERV card?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ikari. But without authorization, I can't access your expense account, and the line for your company's currently down."

Standing in front of the hotel desk, Yui sighs. Looking over her shoulder, Asuka is slumped on the couch in the lobby. She should have just asked Alicia and Tomoe if they could stay over. But, it would be an hour and a half drive back, and even in her exhausted state, Yui's pretty sure Asuka would fight her tooth and nail to keep her from driving.

"Alright," Yui sighs, opening up her purse and taking out her wallet, "Let's see...assuming that I don't then use NERV's budget to buy this hotel, what do you have available that I can afford?"

The girl holds up the room number, and the description of the room. Sighing, Yui walks over to Asuka, key in her hand.

"We're sharing a bed," Yui says, "Don't breathe a *word* of this to Kiko."

...

"Unit-02 and Unit-05 report as ready for sortie!" Maya announces, as the lights chime on next to the Big Screen, rotating out into diagnostic charts for Zwei and Go-kun, "Reego reported in PROBE mainframes! Cherubim on approach to Tokyo-3...reading smaller Pattern Blues disengaging!"

"So we only have two Evas," Pieter growls, rubbing his chin, standing behind the bridge bunnies as Ikari's station rises up behind them, "Can we unfreeze the Mark-01?"

"Unfortunately, no," Gendo announces, "Not in time to combat the Cherubim, and we still haven't found the Third Child. What is the condition of Unit-00?"

Maya pauses, punches in commands on her station, and a third screen pops up to show Unit-00, with the red x over its head.

"Still being fixed," she says, "Armor and dermal regeneration for the head. Section 1 is heading to the infirmary to check on Mari."

"And what about Unit-07?" Pieter asks, "Can we deploy Mana as is in it..."

"Dr. Akagi's heading to the infirmary to run a remote synch test to check on Mana," Makoto reports, "Unit-07 is reported as prepped and awaiting pilot-"

"*And pilot is present. I've contacted Akagi and she has agreed to cede the Unit-07 to me for this sortie."*

A new screen flips open, showing a familiar, absent figure for the past few days, clad in a dark red, green piped and highlighted plugsuit. As Maya's jaw drops and Gendo pushes his glasses up his nose, Pieter stares at the floating image of the woman he loves, and is in that moment convinced of one, true thing.

She is *completely insane.*

"Kyoko," he says, "What are you doing in the *entry plug?"*

"*Well, as it is, I was planning to fight the Angel. I designed Unit-07's AI, so I should be able to synchronize with it to a degree enough to provide covering fire for Zwei and Unit-05.*"

"But-"

"*We can argue all day, or we can deploy Unit-07. Kirishima is in no condition to pilot, Ikari is MIA, and the more Evangelions we deploy against the Cherubim, the better our odds. If you argue that I need more bedrest for a minor incident, I will cut open my own head to show you my brain is undamaged. Ibuki, what's my synchronization score?*"

Maya pauses, turns from the Big Screen, and taps up a command.

"Synch holding...at 17%."

On the screen, Kyoko's face drops. Pieter sighs, hands on his hips, shaking his head.

"Kyoko, for crying out loud-"

"*Pieter. It's me or the Ree.*"

Central Dogma goes silent. Nana's rampage in Go-kun comes into fresh focus.

"F_ it," Pieter growls, "Evas launch!"

...

The red dot centers itself on the middle of Lilith's chest. Presumably, that is where the Core is, and if they have to kill her, that's where she's going to shoot. Standing behind the two Ree, Iti and Siyon, Misato steadies the Barret M-107 on the desk provided by the girls.

"Okay," Misato says, "We're going to do this nice and calmly, Lilith. Give Shinji back."

Lilith...smiles. She tilts her head slightly, sitting on the floor, clad only in Shinji's shirt.

"**Ikari will return. If he wishes to.**"

...

With a groan, Shinji awakens, blinking at the light as he finds a single light swinging over him. Rubbing his forehead, he leans back against the couch he finds himself lying on, hearing a low rumble. Low, threatening. Like a grating machine or a soft, low whisper.

Turning his head to the side, his eyes lock with the slitted eyes of the beast. Only it is not the Beast, but another beast. A large Maine Coon, all fur and bushy tail, sitting on the couch next to his head.

"Merrill. Leave him alone."

The cat, the same cat which hunted him like an animal, gives a protesting mew before hoping off the couch, and ascending the stairs. The man at the desk, at the work bench, clears his throat and turns. It has always seemed odd to Shinji that, for all the importance his mother and father place on his immediate family, and his extended family by way of his aunt and uncle, that he can't honestly remember being in the same room as his grandfather.

But that is who he is in the room with. His grandfather- Katsuhito Ikari, more than two decades younger, his hair a dark gray instead of white, his age in the late middle ages instead of the ancient decades he wears in the time Shinji comes from.

"Young man," he says, "My name is Professor Ikari. Can I ask your name?"

"Um...Shinji," Shinji responds, "Um...Rokobungi."

Professor Ikari nods, rising from his chair.

"Excellent," he says, "Of course, I can tell from your body language and hesitation you're not being completely honest."

"Yeah...yeah, it's kind of a long story."

"The fact that you're in good shape despite being run over by my daughter, and that you have a hair coloration which is not in line with albinism, simply assures that it *is*."

Shinji sighs. Why is it, he thinks, that every member of his family is smarter than him?

"Rest assured, young man," Katsuhito says, "I mean no ill will. I'm curious, is all. But we can talk later. I have an appointment. My daughter Meredith will show you to a guest room."

He rises, and ascends the stairs, leaving Shinji along. Or at least, he thinks alone. But then...Meredith? If that's his grandfather...and Meredith is his daughter...

How come he never knew he had an Aunt Meredith?

A shuffling of something. A presence in the room he was sure wasn't there before. He didn't see anyone come down the stairs, and he stands, whirling around, looking to see who is there with him. Of course, he thinks, it's just nerves, as he isn't sure when he is, or why he's here, or-

"*Heee~ey."*

And then there's the voice. He turns, locking eyes with a young woman almost an exact duplicate of the teenaged version of his mother who ran him over. And save for the brown hair and green eyes and normally pigmented skin, an almost exact duplicate of *Rei.*

"What'cha doin'?" Meredith Ikari asks.

...

A shaft of light appears in Unit-02's hand, folding out into the form of a cannon the size of the Evangelion's arm, with a spinning drum at the end of the barrel and a handlebar hovering over the rail shafts. In the entry plug, Uri sighs, eyes glowing red, as he watches Unit-07 rise up, released from its restraints in the cradle...

And standing completely still.

"Mother? Is there a problem?"

"*Just hand me the Chail Gun, Uri."*

...

"Evangelions are deployed," Maya reports, "Unit-07 is stationary. Unit-02 and Unit-05 moving into position to flank the Angel."

Pieter nods. Zwei steps over towards Unit-07, and black and green Eva stationary as the red and white Eva fixes the Chail Gun into its grip.

"I have an idea," Pieter says, "Re-attach the magnetic clasps onto Unit-07's back and legs."

"Sir?"

"If we can't use Unit-07 as an Eva, we're going to use it as a *turret*."

...

The latches clamp over the legs of Unit-07 and the magnetic locks seize the back. Kyoko yelps as the cradle drops, the view from the entry plug of the quickly going from the cityscape and giant bee to the labyrinthine track system and rail network underneath Tokyo-3.

"*Kyoko! We're going to use the rail system to randomize your deployment around the city. When you surface, fire! Keep the Cherubim distracted!"*

"Wait, what-"

The cityscape returns. Now staring directly at the ass of the cherubim, Kyoko sends the signal, the Eva hefting up the massive cannon and squeezing the triggers. Supersonic rounds, fast enough to hit escape velocity and subsequently catch fire, lance out and subsequently splash against an AT Field. Muttering to herself about Rei and Uri taking their time, the Eva dips again just as the cherubim turns, Kyoko screaming as she feels her stomach dipping up towards her brain.

...

A red light shines in one of the Cherubim's eyes, getting its attention, distracting it as its voice warbles into a buzzing roar. Then another light shines, the mandibles of its face slashing at the air, the gigantic bee thrashing about as the basketball sized pink octahedrons dart around the Cherubim's face.

Which, as it turns out, is all part of the plan. The Cherubim thrashes, and finds its head floating over an open metal plate, leading down into the depths of the Lilim city-

"*SHORYUKEN!"*

Or, more im particular, a launch tube for the 20 meter tall PROBE which is tossed from its launch cradle to hit the Cherubim fist-first in the face.

The other PROBEs follow suit, launched out of their acceleration cradles to descend upon the Cherubim, grabbing at the legs as they

begin to drag it down. It struggles, struggling met by more cutting and biting and stabbing from the Reego controlled mecha.

At least, until the lines of its wings pulse and it forms a solid sphere of force around itself, launching the four PROBEs off and tossing them across the city.

A line of plasma bolts pepper for the force field, the gigantic insect rising into the sky. Which is just when Unit-07 rises beneath it, several bolts from the rail chain gun blasting through the soft underside of the bee.

...

Accessing Core systems.

Interlinkdive online

The Entry Plug turns white. Kyoko allows herself a small smile, folding her hands in her lap as the g-forces noting the Eva diving into the rail system once more register in her addled stomach.

"Ah, good," she sighs, "I was wondering when you would finally make an appearance."

She taps the display on her right wrist, the holographic screen folding out over her eye, giving her a view of the young woman now appearing before her.

"So, JA-Tan," Kyoko says, "Are you finally ready to talk?"

The girl, the intelligence of the war machine she is astrident in, sighs, and folds her hands on her lap.

"*I guess I am,*" she says, "*Mother."*

...

Two people lie side to side on the bed, still in the clothes they entered the hotel in. Tapping on her PDA, Yui gives the occasional glance to Asuka. The girl; her assistant, her son's girlfriend, one of the few Yui would honestly consider her friend- is still staring at the old, worn, used SDAT player.

"Something on your mind?" she asks.

Asuka sighs, rolling the SDAT over in her hand.

"I've...um...just been wondering. This might tell us about Rei, but...I wonder how much she even knew. Rei doesn't seem bothered about know h-her past."

"Rei isn't bothered by much of anything, in all honesty," Yui sighs, "But I admit that I am."

She closes her PDA, resting it on the night table.

"I know that we're looking for something that Naoko left," Yui says, "But...more than that, I just want to be sure that the girls are safe. That Naoko didn't leave any booby traps in them, or virus, or time bombs that would kill them after a certain time..."

Yui sighs, hands on her stomach, staring at the dim light fixture on the ceiling.

"So...what was it l-like?" Asuka asks, "When you first met the R...met Rei and her sisters?"

"It was...complicated," Yui responds, a faint, nostalgic smile crossing her face, "I...well, Naoko wasn't finished with them when I found them. There was a lot of programming, a lot of instructions. I had to go through their commands and their programming, and...well, I had to fix them. I had to help them adjust. And the first one I found myself alone with was the last one Naoko made. Kei."

"So...you met Kei, first?"

"Yes. Well, spent time with her, first. Kei wasn't finished, her command codes and her mental programming wasn't finished. Since she'd be easier to deprogram, I decided to focus on her, first."

"Really?"

"The human mind...and they do have human minds...is a complex thing, Asuka. I focused on Kei because she wasn't finished, so she wasn't any harder than any other child who was raised a certain way. Bits of code, verbal structures...I don't think I could have done the others if I didn't have her as a template. And she spent so much time with me, that..."

"She imprinted on you."

"Exactly," Yui says, and sighs, "I should've seen that coming. I was the first person, first sane person, that Kei ever met. And I was also the person she was based on, so she must have instantly recognized me as her mother."

Another sigh. She pinches the bridge of her nose, her eyes shutting tightly.

"Mind you, that was around the time I found out about Ichi, too. So I have a little girl who's Shinji age, who always called me 'Mother' and who always wanted to be around me, who was also part of a batch of superhumans the woman I trusted my son with made to kill me, and at the same time the Evangelion had magically become my actual daughter."

She sighs, again. And again, as Asuka folds the SDAT around in her hand.

"I d-don't know," she says, "I think th-that they turned out fine."

...

With great brutality does the wall of flame emerge from Go-kun's shoulder pylons, burning at the flesh of the cherubim as Uri extends his AT Field against Camael's own.

"Sooo~oo I was thinkin'," Rei says, sing songing along to the sounds of Camael's squeals of burning burning pain, "When we're done, Go-kun?"

"**Yes, Rei?**"

"Well, I kinda have a Single Teenage Mother's meeting," Rei says, "And since we're not too far from the YMCA they meet at, I wanted to know if you wanted to come along with me."

A pause on the other end.

"**Really?**"

"Ayep," Rei responds, urging the drill deeper and deeper into Camael's mouth, "I know I said I wanted to be the bestest Single Teenage Mother ever, but I know that you've been a great Dad to the mind***babies*** and really should be there, 'cause you're not a deadbeat or

anything."

"**That is very mature of you, Rei. I'm...quite flattered that you're taking this seriously. No disrespect meant.**"

"I knooo~oow," Rei says, as Go-kun begins beating Camael with one of its own legs, "I got so caught up in starting a rivalry, that maybe it's time for me to be Responsible and stuff, and being responsible means not turning people away to up the difficulty level."

"**Indeed.**"

"That and it's *awesome* that the father of my mind***babies*** can level the building if he sneezes. They need to see that."

"**...maybe.**"

"An' we need to talk about childcare, too, 'cause Tres got in trouble at the nursery school for bringing in her pet spiders-"

"*They're not spiders, they're my* cultists!*"* the outraged Reego announces, over the sound of the grinding of her PROBEs' integrated chainsaw as it tries to geld Camael, "*They're only **babies** cause they were only cat sized, and the woman who murdered them when she squished'em with a broom has to go to jaaa~ail."*

"And yep, they did try to arrest the teacher, so we definitely need to talk to them about it."

"...**right.**"

...

"Odd that NERV's lines are down," Yui says, "Hope it isn't an emergency."

"I th-think they'd contact us if it was."

...

"So, JA-Tan," Kyoko says, folding her hands in her lap, "Tell me, please. As your mother...I guess...am I your mother?"

"*You did create me, with Mana. I think that does."*

Kyoko purses her lips. So, yes, technically she did create her. Well, if she was one parent, and Mana was the other, that does sort of make her a lesbian. And possible a paedophile. But that line of thought takes her dangerously into territory normally charted by the Ikaris.

"Perhaps," she says, "But more importantly, as your creator, I need to know. What is your problem?"

JA-Tan, the innocent girl, the subconscious to Mana Kirishima, frowns, and gives the answer that deep down, Kyoko was expecting.

"*Mana is my problem."*

...

"C-Can I ask something?"

Yui props herself up on her elbows, turning to Asuka. The girl is staring at the ceiling, hands folded on her stomach.

"Sure," she says, "If I can ask you one."

"Y-you first, then."

"Why are you still stuttering?"

Asuka sighs, staring at the ceiling. She closes her eyes, her chest rising and falling, composing her words.

"I...don't get better th-that quickly," she says, "Mother and I...we've been talking. B-but just because we're...just because we're better now, it d-doesn't change the last sixteen years. I'm s-still a mess, when you look at it."

"Does change, though," Yui responds.

"H-how?"

"You're *talking* about it," Yui says with a smirk, "Before, you were hiding it. Now, you're not, and that means people can help. You're talking with your mother?"

"Yes."

"And Misato?"

"Yes."

"What about Shinji?"

Asuka sighs, turning back to the ceiling.

"We do," she responds, "B-but...but he's n-never really cared about things like my stutter. He's always said that n-no matter what I sound like, I'm still me. I th-think it's kind of sweet."

Yui nods.

"Shinji's like that," she responds, "He doesn't show it, but he has trouble connecting to people. When he finds someone he likes, or he finds someone he wants to be around, he doesn't care about any self-perceived flaws. And that's just for people he likes, or people he hangs around. For his girlfriend?"

Asuka nods, a small smile on her face.

"I d-did talk to Misato, though," she says, "I'm...I'm going to see someone. Talk to someone."

"A therapist?"

She nods, again.

"Good," Yui says, reaching over, squeezing Asuka's hand, "Good. Just remind me when we get back, and...well, you don't need to forward the info to me, Misato technically heads Section 2 so they'll vet whoever you see for security reasons, but keep me in the loop, okay?"

She lies back down, turning back to her PDA.

"So, Asuka," she says, "What was your question?"

"W-well...what were you like? When you were my age?"

...

Ikari.

Sitting up on the bed, Shinji turns to find himself staring at the ghostly

image of the little Lilith, floating in front of him. And wearing his shirt.

"Okay," he says, "What the Hell?"

You have questions.

"Yeah. Where am I? When am I? Did you actually send me back in time?"

Perhaps. It is not my place to say.

"Uh...huh. So why does my Mom have a sister I never heard about who sounds like Rei?"

The door knocks. Lilith disappears. Sitting up, he stands up, thankfully finding that he is fully dressed, unlike that other time travel movie he watches where someone went back in time to meet his mother when she was his age. That was wrong.

On many levels.

"Hey there," Yui says, peaking her head in, "I wanted to see how you were doing, and I've got a visi~tor!"

He arches an eyebrow. She takes that as a 'send them in,' and Yui yanks on the arm of the person, pulling in with her a lanky, dark haired man. He can tell from the lighter skin and fair hair that he's not japanese. In fact, he'd place his country of origin near Asuka's.

"Shinji," Yui says, "This is my boyfriend, Victor. He's here visiting from his home country, and his dad works with mine."

"Yes," the young man says, narrowing his eyes as he examines Shinji, hands folded behind his back, "Yes, I see. Very odd looking."

Yui rolls her eyes. Waving a goodbye and something about needing to talk with her mother, she drags Victor out. It only took a few seconds, but Shinji already feels an intense dislike for the young man. Something about how...angular. Aloof. He was. He also knows he's talked to that man before...

Right. That interview he had, before Mari died the first time.

"Well, Shit," Shinji mutters to himself, "He's one of the bad guys, isn't he?"

"Yeee~ep."

He turns, to find Meredith sitting on the bed next to him. He is not terribly surprised, as he's already surmised that his heretofore unknown aunt is some sort of Proto-Rei, and hence can sneak up on people without effort.

"So, I'm thinking we need to break them up, too," Meredith says, tenting her fingers under her nose.

"Same."

"Weee~eell I'm her sister," Meredith responds, "What's *your* reason?"

Would you believe I'm your time displaced nephew comes to mind. Wisely, he does not say it. Yet, at least. Instead, he smiles. It is very possible, he realizes deep down, that his extended exposure to Lilith has set off his reeishness again, and he may need a swift punch to the head when this is done.

"Oh, no reason," he says, "But...I have an idea."

Chapter 95: Track Shift

The Big Screen itself is crowded with faces. It is a long held tradition in the worlds of show business, programming, and politics is to never work with small children. That tradition, Pieter thinks, can now apply to paramilitary organizations.

"PROBEs have been returned to MAGI control and returning to the launch chutes," Maya announces, "PROBE 4 at 78%. PROBE 3 at 62%. PROBE 2 at 83%. PROBE 1 at 38% and it's missing two legs."

"Status on the Angel?"

"Angel's regenerating, Sub Director," Aoba says, eyes still focused on the giant bee as it wrestles with Go-kun, "It's AT Field's pulsing in all directions."

Which is just in time with an ammo building folding like paper.

"No shit," Pieter says, "Status on the other Evas?"

"Go-kun's optimal," Makoto says, "Unit-07 is in dive mode. Unit-02 is rearming and approaching the Angel."

Pieter nods. Tapping the controls on his PDA, the circle of light next to him hums to life, forming into a hologram of the floating fish man usually in the basement.

"Junior, what's the word?"

"**The Angel is the Cherubic counterpart to Matariel. He was the one destroyed by Nagisa, shortly before my manifestation.**"

"The crybaby Angel?"

"**Indeed. His appearing to not be...challenging...may not be due to it holding a ruse, but simply due to its strategy appearing via surprise.**"

Pieter nods. A small smirk on his face appears. Turning from the battle to the portraits of the pilots, he clears his throat.

"Okay, listen up," he says, "If what Junior said is right, we may be able to overwhelm the AT Field with concentrated firepower. We saw that with the chail gun, but I want Uri to arm up with as big a gun as

possible and close to optimal range. As soon as it's distracted, Rei, I want you to locate its Core and hit it with as big a blast as Go-kun can manage. Any word from Kyoko?"

"JA-Tan's cut out communications from the Entry Plug. Synch ratio rose 1%."

"That's progress, then," Pieter mutters, and turns back to the now-empty desk where Ikari would normally sit, "And Junior, I have another job for you..."

Chapter 95: Track Shift

Bringing his left hand back and curling the fingers into a fist, Go-kun swings, taking off Camael's head, the chitinous mass dissolving into LCL as it falls off and exposing the red core in the base of the neck.

"**Core located,**" Go-kun books, "**I'm neutralizing the Cherubim!**"

Another whir, the drill spinning, and it slams into the red gem. The force and the AT-field neutralization aspects of the Eva come together to shred the crystal, the form of the Cherubim shuddering and rippling, red lines running down its flesh as it spasms, and collapses.

"**Cherubim neutralized. I'm heading back to-**"

And there is a faint buzzing sound. The back of Camael begins opening, parting lengthwise down the middle. Spheres, no more than a foot in width, begin to rise up from the back. Each one parts with a sickening sucking sound, coming themselves to reveal shapes which curl out from within.

Each one sprouts four translucent wings. In the plug, Maya counts out numbers, yelling that each registers as a blue pattern. A hundred. Four hundred. Eight hundred, total. Which is when Rei thinks back to her biology classes, and it makes sense.

Camael wasn't just a long, grotesque caricature of a bee because it was a giant monster. It was extra long because it was a *queen.* And as Rei stares down the now numerous swarm of angry buzzing extensions of Camael, she remembers.

Queen Bees are full of *eggs.*

A step, and the giant rises, freeing itself from the bounds of gravity by grace of its own force. Berlin disappears beneath him as the course is set, the clouds dancing beneath his feet. Inside the cockpit, hands on the controls, he closes crimson gold eyes and lets the holographic screens surrounding his little command center tick out numbers.

A message sent to his equal, a message sent to their digital creations, about where he is going and that he will be back in a few hours. There is much to do, all inherited from the man who raised him.

The screens close. The entry plug, the portable Command and Control that he sits in when he pilots his other half, glows white around him as he leans back on the cushions of his seat, the red sphere built into the seat behind him spinning as the miniature MAGI system sets off coordinates, compensates with the vernier thrusters, sets entry and exit velocities.

But as the blue sky tints towards the inky night, Kaworu Nagisa can only muse that he is *flying*.

"Time to NERV-Luna?"

"*12 hours transit."*

"And if we do a lunar orbit?"

"*13."*

"Excellent. Take the scenic route," Kaworu responds, and folds his hands on his lap, "I will be...occupied."

He closes his eyes, the distant ticking of numbers in the background of the entry plug as his mind goes deep down into the Core. A part of him reintegrates and spreads outwards, upwards, everywhere at once. He closes his eyes. His body enters a form of REM sleep, but more than that. And when he opens his eyes, he is floating in the gray place, the barren plain he shares with his kin.

I greet you, brother.

He looks up. The halo of light floats above him, silently shifting and spinning, a projection of its totality.

"I greet you as well, Armisael," he responds, "How are you?"

Fulfilled. My grand project continues apace. Nearly half this landmass has been healed.

"I see. May I ask, why you are doing this? I know you've revealed the resting place of the first of us, and I thank you for it. Even if he has not stirred for me or talked to me. But why continue?"

Because it brings me peace. Instead of destruction, I bring creation. Instead of death, I bring life. I find it fulfilling. Does not your alliance with the Lilim bring you peace, as well?

Kaworu nods. A faint smile crosses his lips.

"It does," he responds, "But I find it odd that you task yourself in restoring nature. The lilim do not have a great history with restoring their natural world."

The lilim did not wipe out the dinosaurs. The lilim did not drive the trilobites to extinction or cause the mass extinction 2 billion years ago, brother. The lilim, while fascinating and intelligent, are but a small part of this world. I would rather focus on things other than the bipeds. I will leave them to you.

"Fair enough."

It seems to be a common thread. Those of us of our generation are putting aside the hatreds. We put aside the need for Complimentation. All save for one.

"Zeruel. I know. I sometimes fear for him, brother. He is the most powerful of us. And the most dangerous of us."

And misguided. It would be childs play for us to make strategy and strike at the Lilim, Tabris. Many of us together are dangerous. We could ally with the Cherubim, find our other fallen brothers. Ignite the White Egg and overrun the Base Earth.

"But we do not," Kaworu responds, "Why?"

Because if we did so, we would wipe the world clean and begin anew. And I doubt that we could build the wonders that the Lilim have. Even as I restore the land beneath me, do the Lilim follow me. They make offerings of fruit and grain towards me. They praise me and they compliment my work. Could our own kin do

such things?

"I wonder that myself, sometimes," Kaworu says, "I do. For all we focus on the preservation of our kind, what have we actually created? Are we truly worth more than the Lilim?"

Or are the Lilim worth more than us?

"That's a fools debate," Kaworu says, the shadow of a scowl crossing his face, "No species is inherently more worthy of survival. All must work for survival. That is the principal of adaptation."

Indeed.

A soft chuckle. The first he has heard from his brother in memory.

Of course, you know the Lilim better than I. You have walked among them. You have lived and died among them. So, instead of asking if we or the Lilim are more worthy of survival, I ask this: Can we and the Lilim not adapt so both of us can survive?

...

"I think it's a tactically *bad decision* to give the Reego flamethrowers," Pieter says, "Recall the PROBEs. Akagi, are those static nets ready?"

Next to him, Ritsuko nods.

"I'll supervise the installation," she says, "Maya, update me on the AT Field fluctuations and real time changes in the cherubim's condition!"

"Yes, Sempai!"

Ritsuko turns and sprints out, Pieter watching as Zwei and Go-kun attempt to swat the giant angelic bees out of the sky.

"Alright," he says, "Start preliminary defrost procedures on the Mark-01. And someone find me Ikari!"

...

There is now an addition to the pants on the floor, surrounded by an expanding puddle of LCL. Now, next to it, is a french maid dress, also

surrounded and splattered with LCL, loosely oozing around the ruffled clothes. Staring at it, Iti, Siyon, and Misato glance from it to Lilith, and back again.

"Crap," Misato says, "Dr. Ikari's going to *kill* us."

Lilith cocks an eyebrow. Siyon cracks her knuckles.

"**It would be unwise for you to attack me,**" Lilith says.

"Really?" Siyon asks, "How's that?"

"**Because I am the only one who can return them. In time.**"

...

"You know, when I was your age, I'd probably be a lot more easily pissed off by people making moves on my boyfriend."

Asuka closes the book, and turns to Yui.

"Y-you had a boyfriend?"

"Believe it or not, Asuka," Yui says with a smirk, "I was not born in college, nor was the first person I met the Commander. He was my...mm...I think third boyfriend. Anyway, I had a boyfriend when I was your age."

Asuka nods, rolling her hand. Sighing, Yui continues.

"Similar circumstances, actually," she says, "Victor was the son of someone my father worked with. We'd known each other for a while. About...oh, I'd say I met him when I was five."

She taps her lip, nodding.

"Accidentally made him trip on some rocks. He ended up getting this thin scar on his face. Didn't take it that well. Anyway, when we were fifteen, we decided to start dating. Both of us were in puberty, and naturally thought the boys and girls at our respected schools were below us, intellectually. It was also around then I realized that I didn't want to be involved with someone like me, because I tend to, you know..."

"Be t-to smart for your own good?"

Yui nods, smiling as she pats Asuka on the back.

"That's it," she says, "And also a wee bit manipulative. So, we called it off. He's still single, from what I remember. But, he's busy with his job, his country, and everything else. I can't remember for the life of me exactly *why* we broke up. But, we did. Probably had something to do with my mother."

Asuka nods, sighing. She can understand mothers having something to do with relationships. Given, hers didn't really involve herself with how she and Shinji got together, save for that...rant...she had when she was drunk.

"S-so it was just the four of you?"

"Hm?"

"You, your p-parents and your brother?"

Yui nods.

"Yes. Just the four of us."

...

The woman in the kitchen doesn't look like the people Shinji was raised by. She doesn't look that much like his mother, meaning that Yui Ikari- and subsequently the Ree- probably inherited her looks from her father's side. So, all he ever knew of Misao Ikari was that she was dead. He never probed for further details.

But now as he walks into the kitchen, he sees her there. She smiles, chopping carrots and celery as he stands in the doorway.

"Can I help you?" she asks, "Did you want something to eat?"

"Uh...I'm...okay."

Shinji scratches the back of his neck. Nervously chuckles.

"Sorry," he says, "I'm...I've never been around here."

She nods, and continues cutting the vegetables. A small hum comes from her lips as she works. It's not a sound he's heard before, especially not from Mom. But Mom was never the type to cook.

"So, are you feeling alright?" she asks, "You're up and about awfully fast. I just sit in the car when Yui drives and I feel like I need a lie down, much less get hit by her."

"I...uh...I heal quick," he says, "I...hey, do you need anything?"

"No," she says, "Well, I wouldn't want a guest of the house to cook, anyway. It's bad enough when I let my husband in the kitchen. But if you wanted to do something, could you find Yui and Meredith and get them downstairs?"

He nods, and quickly exits. Hands thrust into his pockets, and he sighs as he navigates the house. He knows the cat is watching him. If this is true-if any of this is true, he needs to have a chat with his mom when he gets out of this. Because if there's one thing Shinji Ikari isn't, it's been curious about his family.

If there's anything he's been, it's been *passive.* He was like that, just...being there. He never actively made friends, never went out of his way to even talk with his aunt and uncle when he stayed with them, he just...

And then he just started looking out for people. Started reaching out. Of course, he knows what changed that. Even if, maybe, he should give some of his school friends a call, because he has kind of ignored them. But maybe it's time he started looking into his family's past.

Climbing the stairs, he ascends to the second floor. Walking down the hall, he stops in front of one of the bedrooms, raises his hand to knock, and-

"Voici la puissance de fromage!"

A loud crash. Someone screaming, and shouting in french. Swinging open the door, he spots a girl with blue hair, red eyes, and in a french maid outfit sitting on Victor's chest and forcing a frog down his throat.

"*Zyuu?"*

"Juste une minute, je suis protéger la vertu de notre mère!"

...

Another of the fifty meter long bees flies up to the structure, a ball of

wax in its arms pressed against the expansive shape to lock it in place. Over the launch chute, if one was to look far enough away, they would have recognized the vaguely conical structure as resembling a terrestrial beehive. Except, of course, for the fact that the hive is not the size of a man's head, but rather twice as large as an Evangelion.

Which only makes it worse when the gout of flame from Unit-02's carried flamethrower splashes off the hive's AT Field.

"MAGI is reading at least 800 independent blue patterns," Maya shouts, "Each bee is registering as an Angel!"

"Ammo buildings 4, 8, 12 and 15 have been compromised," Aoba adds, "They're turning them into hives!"

"Fire working would be *wonderful* right now," Pieter growls, pacing the bridge as multiple screens open up, "Give me something. Is anything getting through their AT Fields?"

"The Camaels are reinforcing each other's AT fields," Maya responds, "Zwei and Go-kun can't penetrate theirs."

Pieter nods, leaning against Maya's chair. Turning once, seeing Ikari's seat empty, he growls to himself and turns back to the screen.

"Aoba, open a channel with NERV-Luna. We're going to need some extra firepower."

...

"So, Mana is your problem," Kyoko says, steepling her fingers as she stares at her wayward creation, the plug walls white and the chatter of the Central Dogma a distant buzzing, "Elaborate. Please."

The 'girl,'- really an elaborate fork AI- wrings her hands in a gesture that would be considered cute, were she not the core intelligence of the 200' tall war machine Kyoko is currently sitting in.

"I am Mana's subconscious given a form," JA-Tan explains, "*And deep down, Mana hates herself. So, she hates me. And I hate her."*

"You're maybe a few months old. How can you hate someone?"

"*Because I'm limited to that. When you created me, you had a limited medium with which to work. Now that I'm in a Core instead of Jet Alone*

Prime's AI network, I find myself trying to expand but...failing in some ways. As long as I am Mana's subconscious, I find myself unable to connect with her. Her self-loathing is what is at the core of my being."

"You got along fine when you were just JAP's AI, JA-Tan. What changed?"

"*We didn't need to synchronize when I was a robot. If we needed to create an AT field, that was fine...but...now, when we have to link our thoughts together, there are walls. Mana will not let anyone in. Especially herself."*

Kyoko silently curses to herself, steepling her fingers and staring at the girl who fidgets in front of her. Another mistake, she muses. Her triumph, her proving that her Synthesis procedure- especially with the revelations she's had about Ichi's identity and how much Ikari made up in the notes she forwarded to the Second branch a decade ago. And now this, her creation not even able to perform her intended task.

The her from months ago would just yell at this girl, try to force her to do what she's told. But now...

"So, Mana can't synch with you," Kyoko says, "But she could probably synchronize with another Evangelion...JA-Tan, would you be adverse to having a different pilot?"

JA-Tan tilts her head. Curiosity, evident.

"*Such as...?"*

"Do you have any in mind?"

JA-Tan flicks her eyes from side to side. Clears her throat.

"*Well...I understand Mr. Ikari is not piloting at present..."*

...

The AT Field shatters, and driving the progressive knife in, Unit-02's hands grip the tea and pull open the hive. Blood red LCL splatters, sticking to the gauntlets of the eva like honey. A gigantic bee, a quarter the size of the Eva, bursts forth from within the hive, stabbing at the Eva with its stinger as Uri grunts, grabbing the creature by the tail and swinging it into the honeycombed side of the hive.

"Fire would be wonderful, right now," Uri growls, "Ayanami! I'm

forcing open entry holes on either side of the hive! As soon as I'm clear, napalm!"

Forcing Zwei all the way into the hive, at least twice as tall as the Eva itself, Uri looks down. Before him is a drop, he realizes. The Hive has consumed the entire ammo building, its waxy tubules descending down the building's position and into the rail systems themselves.

"Well, that's not good."

Deep within the hive positions directly over the launch chute, the orange red mass begins to open. Camaeli, the technical name of the 50' long monster bees, feet masses of blood red LCL to the man sized blue grubs within the hives as artillery fire pounds futilely upon the outer walls.

And the grubs detach, and begin descending down the rail network, into the armor layers themselves.

...

"You!" the sixteen year old Yui shouts, pushing past Shinji as she charges into the room, "Get your hands off my boyfriend!"

Zyuu looks up and tilts her head, only to effortlessly flip off of Victor and into a handstand before landing on her feet. Raising one hand, she catches Yui's fist, shaking her head with a disappointed sigh.

"No no no," she says, "Don't put your thumb in your fist. That just gives you a better chance to break your thumb. Thumb goes outside and *under* the fist."

She catches the second punch.

"Now that's better. So why don't we talk and-"

And Yui brings her foot up between Zyuu's legs, the two struggling before falling out the open window, off the roof, and into the now empty pond in front of the Ikari household.

"Well, that works, too," Meredith says, slapping Shinji on the back as she leans out the window to watch, "Originally I kinda wanted him to get reaaaally embarrassed, but, y'know, cat fight works, too."

...

The first of the grubs falls through the chute, forming stubby, forearm sized legs which it uses the scurry along the walls, dropping with dozens of its kin into the ductwork of NERV-1. They fall into the central corridor above the Cages, levels up from the latticework of Terminal Dogma, landing on oozing feet as they open their front ends to reveal rows of hooked teeth.

"*Oh, well that was easy. I honestly didn't think you'd make my job that easy. If I knew you were mindless enough to get herded by my redirecting a few ducts, I would have just dangled a turkey leg on a rope."*

The cycloptean effigy of Unit-00's head peaks out of the retracted ceiling tiles, as the walls in the large corridor open up and several mounted gatling guns fold up. The red lights blink on, cheering chirping voices coming through the limited speakers mounted on them.

"Hello."

"Target acquired."

"Pray to your God."

"*Well, it was fun taunting you, mindless grub things. I'd like you to meet my grand daughters. They're learning such wonderful things from me. Like arithmetic. Problem solving. Hand eye coordination. And* ***murder.****"*

The barrels begin spinning. Red laser pointers paint the Camaeli grubs.

"*Make Grandma proud, babies."*

...

A quick kick tosses Yui back into the lake and sends Zyuu skyward, flipping before landing in a crouch on the roof. Climbing up from the water, Yui raises her fist in the air, shouting obscenities. Many of them challenges.

"No!" Zyuu yells, "I'm not going to fight you! Because that could cause a feedback loop and destroy the universe!"

"Get down here!" Yui screams, "I'm not done with you, yet!"

"No! Il est faux de me lancer dans un catfight avec ta mère, peu importe à quel point le choix de ses copains est!"

"Learn to speak proper French, you flat-chested bitch!"

Zyuu's nostrils flare. With a single extension of her legs, she launches herself off of the roof top and lands feet first on Yui's chest, driving them both into the water. More yelling from the pond as water splashes and clothes tear, as the temporally-displaced-daughter catfights with the teenage version of her mother. Gene sampler.

Yes.

Victor is on the floor with a nosebleed. Part of this is because he has snails shoved up his nose and the legs of the third frog he was forced to eat dangling from his mouth. That, and he also saw some of the fight, to see his girlfriend get her shirt wet and very, very ripped.

And so did Shinji. Leaving his mother's former boyfriend- and if this was any indication of what the house is normally like he can see why it's a *former*- he runs out, running down the stairs to the exit.

"Sooo~ooo," Meredith says, skipping alongside him as he runs, "That was kinda unexpected."

He skids to a halt.

"Define, *unexpected."*

"Weee~ell, it was only supposed to be you, here," Meredith says, lolling back and forth on her heels, "Zyuu wasn't supposed to be here. Guess that means it's going bad outside."

He tilts his head, obviously confused. Meredith smiles, teeth showing, shining.

"Care to explain what happened?"

Katsuhito Ikari walks by, grabbing both Shinji and Meredith as they exit the house, walking towards the lake where Yui is now forcing Zyuu's head underwater.

"Okay," Shinji says, pointing at Zyuu, "That's my sister."

"Yes. And why is she fighting my daughter?"

Shinji sighs, scratching his head and shrugging.

"I'm asking myself that question right now," he responds, as Yui turns, seeing her father and slowly lifting the not-at-all drowning Zyuu from the water, "But...I think I can explain everything."

Meredith smiles. The sky turns orange. The water turns to LCL. And the Sun blinks, becoming the blood red eye of Lilith.

"**No.**"

And then the world is gone.

...

Sipping on the coffee, Pieter grimaces. There has to be room in the budget for a decent coffee maker, somewhere. Or at least coffee that doesn't taste like ass. They are in the late hours of the night- they avoided shift switches if only to keep everything steady, and at least the Bridge Bunnies haven't shown any signs of fatigue.

"Status?" he asks.

"The turrets are holding off the grubs at Junctions 7, 12, and 18," Maya reports, sipping her tea, "No reports of deeper penetration."

"Great. And why are the turrets talking again?"

Naok00's head lowers, held by a waldo from the ceiling.

"*Oh, don't worry. I haven't, say, bred the neural patterns of Lieutenant Ibuki and Dr. Akagi to give myself grandchildren. Although, they would more be nieces. Instead, I've had many of Kei's little digital compensations coming to visit, and they've agreed to man the turrets and make it into a game."*

"A...game?" Pieter asks.

"*I'm keeping score. Or, I would be. If I was paying attention to them instead of, you know, keeping us from dying."*

The head turns to the direction of the door as Misato runs in, followed by Iti. She skids to a stop next to Pieter, panting.

"Katsuragi?"

"Can't...get...a signal...in Sheol," she wheezes, "Problem. Shinji's been eaten by Lilith. The Commander's down there with Nana and Hatchi. I'm up here. New plan."

"I'm listening."

...

He opens his eyes. Seizing the controls in the entry plug, the plug flashes white, then a full view of the Trafalgar base and NERV-LUNA. Grunting, Kaworu listens, hearing the silent voice. Hearing over the buzzing and the bedlam the whispers of the monster, and the distress call from below.

"Very well."

He flicks a switch. The basketball sized Core underneath his seat, a miniature MAGI computer, flickers to life.

"NERV-1, this is the Mark-06," he says, "I have received your distress call. And I am enroute."

He cuts the channel. Synching with his other half, the Mark-06 extends a hand. Rising from the moon rock and crater, one of the Replica Lances flies into its hand. He is hesitant to unleash the Mark-09 in Tokyo-03. While it could deal with the Cherubim, it may...slip its leash.

Better to do this personally.

"Let's go."

The AT-Field wraps around the Mark-06, forming into a sphere. And a rush of silence, and the Eva is gone.

...

"*Kyoko, what's your progress?"*

Sighing, the entry plug turns opaque once again, and Kyoko looks up to see the picture of her ex-husband and present fiance appearing in her vision. Folding her hands on her lap, she cocks an eyebrow.

"I admit defeat," she says, "I have an idea on how to get around the piloting problem with Kirishima, but I'm also reasonably sure I can't pilot the Evangelion."

"*No worries. We have a way around that."*

"Synchronization at 74%. Evangelion Unit-07 has activated."

"Did I do that?"

A giggle from behind her.

"Nooo~oope! *I* did!"

Kyoko turns. Floating in the LCL behind her is one of the Ree. One of the Ree wearing a pink plugsuit.

"*Kiko?"*

...

Mana grimaces as the final wire is connected into place, sitting in a folding chair underneath the MAGI cores. Grunting, she flexes her fingers, the newly connected mechanical arms translating thought to action. Still, they aren't the same arms she's had for the past year, aren't the same legs. It'll take some getting used to, she guesses.

"Okay," she says, "What's the plan again?"

"Well, since we're still having problems with Unit-07, we had an idea," Ritsuko says, "Your cybernetics are designed for a brain-machine interface. Meaning that, if we have Naok00 focus on the defense, we can have you focus on the offense."

"Meaning you're going to...what?"

"Have your brain control the artillery grid around Tokyo-3 and the Geofront."

Mana grins, and sits up.

"I like that plan."

...

The sky turns to black glass. Or more importantly, the sky itself fades, and Shinji finds himself facing a wall of black. Or a floor, or ground, which he realizes as he slowly, shakily stands up. Zyuu is already up, of course, looking...and looking lost.

"Where...where are we?"

"**Guess.**"

The spectral image of Lilith appears, and past her, he sees it. The blasted, empty plane. The distant light in the sky in the form of a great bird. The mountain in the distance, covered in thunder, beneath the spinning octahedron that was once Ramiel.

The ground beneath them is a perfect circle of black glass, wisps of fire still dancing in the air. And all around them are foothills, faces upon them, whispering dead oaths. Some foothills bare tentacles, stubby and short. Some bare the silver metal and outstretched hand, a face much like an Eva decorating them. Some resemble clockwork spiders, some a worm within a shell.

But all of them whispering.

"**Without ADAM, they cannot die. They cannot return. But ADAM is lost to the Cherubim. All they have is rage.**"

"We're in the Overmind," Shinji says, "This...is this why you absorbed me?"

"**Yes. You had to see.**"

A movement in the distance. Shinji sees a shape by the crystal mountain, something formless and vast. But only for a second, before it is gone.

"**It has changed. The obsidian beneath you is from the fiery ascension of the Sword. The Cherubim have become numerous, but cling to life in vain hope of returning to the Father. And the fused remains of the Grigori sleep beneath Ramiel.**"

Lilith turns to them. Zyuu shrinks, standing behind Shinji.

"Do you see?"

"I have questions," Shinji responds, "Why didn't I ever know I had an

aunt? Why did she act like...like Rei?"

Lilith smiles.

"It...it was you, wasn't it?" he asks, "If...if that was real, you..."

The words die on his lips. A small, sudden realization.

"You've been following my family for a while, haven't you?" he asks, "It's no coincidence you're interested in me, is it?"

"No."

The ground shifts again. A hill behind them splits open, an ear splitting buzzing marking the extension of eight translucent wings. Legs dig into the ground, the massive, phlegm covered form rising, the red glistening crystal of the Core shining in the dim angelic light as twenty seven red eyes open on the massive head.

"Um...yeah," Zyuu says, "I...uh...kinda forgot. There's a Cherubim attacking."

A sound like twisting, rippling flesh fills the air as Lilith disappears. Exoskeleton hardens, wings harden as the wind whips about it to bring it to rise. The sounds of buzzing from the wings fill the air, as the golden hairs lining its body dry, releasing steady rains of liquid flesh and pollen upon the ground below.

When it lands a foot upon the ground, the obsidian cracks and spider webs, the marking altar of the Angel of Fire's ascension quickly distorting in the birth pangs of the Cherubim. And on the ground, Shinji and Zyuu can only watch in horror.

"*Sacre Bleu...*" Zyuu whispers, "That's why they can't kill it. It's keeping it's *Core* in *here."*

The Camael-Queen, the full majestic form of the Joy of God, rises. Deep below it's 800-foot long form, the host of the Core drags the mighty stinger along the ground before it notices the two Lilithians standing before it.

Planting its legs on the ground, the Cherubim lowers its face before them, and opening its mandibles, it roars.

Chapter 96: Dreams Made Flesh

In the hours it felt, it felt like days or weeks or years or aeons for them to arrive. Cahethal spoke softly to her. She spoke reassurance and spoke gentle reminder, a voice carrying with it the weight of memory that transcended epochs. Lilly, small as she was, immature as she was, listened.

Of the ongoing struggle. Of their creation. Of the misconception that Lilly was-that Leliel was- like the other Angels NERV has fought.

We are Seraphim

Cahethal explained,

We are the control [concepts] that [Father] placed upon arrival to Earth.

We number five.

There is Michael, Prince of the Angels

Kemuel, the wholeness of us

Seraphiel, who is of all of us

Myself, who is the tree from which the Fruit of Life springs,

and you,

The gate between worlds.

But the war, Lilly asks, why does there have to be a war? She lives fine with the children of the Black Egg. So does Israfel. So does the last, glorious piece of Sandalphon and the successor of Ramiel. Why does there have to be a war?

Because you were given life. And all life, no matter how great nor small, is given the chance to self determinate.

Another voice. From everywhere, nowhere.

I am pleased. I see within you a spark which refuses to die or flicker. Bridge-type was not designed to reproduce, but you have successfully done so.

A light, which illuminates the void.

Let me take a look at you. Ah. Re designation. Instead of acting as an intercontinuum bridgeform, you have become an interdistance bridgeform. Hm. Possibly able to time travel if you can form a tunnel between two distant enough points, I guess.

A pause in the voice. A sigh, distant, and the light begins to retract, and spin around, forming into a single point of light the size of Lilly herself...and then itself collapsing, forming into a shape standing in the ether of the Void. The form is of a young man, sixteen years old, with black hair and blue eyes, dressed in a white buttoned shirt and black pants, effortlessly floating upon white sneakers.

"Sorry," he says, "I got a little carried away. But, I saw this shapeform was important, so I took its form. What is it, by the way?"

A Lilim. A child of the Black Egg.

The young man, a mirror of Shinji, sighs.

"F_ing dandy. I have met your...parent, for lacking terminology, so I may as well introduce myself, Lilly. I am, for lack of the better terms, the person/PROGRAM in charge. The designation you would have in your memories would be [**ANCESTOR.**]"

8D!

"Yes. It's good to meet you, too."

Chapter 96:

Dreams Made Flesh

In the Overmind, the Angeli**c** groupmind, th**e** mass that is the Quee**n** of the Camiel Swarm awakens. Openings i**t**s mass of eyes, the grot**e**sque insect **r**ises, flapping **c**ellulose wings as it roars. Shinji t**a**kes the **n**atural respo**n**se- he runs, grabbing Zyuu's wrist and taking **o**ff in a sprin**t** towards somew**h**ere. Given, he's currently inside an**o**ther p**l**ane of existence. Exactly where he can hea**d** to, he's not entirely sure.

The mountain covered in lightning looks like a good choice.

"Run!" Shinji yells, as the massive bee begins charging after them. The

whispers of dying Cherubim around them fill the air, urging Camael on, to kill the Enemy, to destroy him.

Zyuu, for all her normal...Zyuuness...silently agrees with Shinji.

This is an alien world for her. She should not be here.

"Lilith!" Shinji yells, "Now would be a good time! Get us out of here!"

Grabbing Shinji by the collar, Zyuu lifts him up, holding him like a bride over the threshold and sprinting. The bee continues buzzing, Zyuu running past the shattered mountain of the grinning face, past fallen eidoleons, at the end of the black glass desert. In the distance, a great black mountain looms, bare but rumbling like a sleeping volcano.

And the sky is gray and shadowed. The mountains that once supported it like columns are down to a handful, either shattered to rumble, or dismantled by their own hands.

The ground rumbles. The ground shifts as Camael slams its claws into it, tossing them both off their feet. The scramble back as it opens its mandibles, a tunnel lined in teeth revealed for their fate...

And then a black tendril slams into the face of the Cherubim, popping eyes like pustules, the Cherubim screaming as it collapses, wings twitching as LCL pools around it. The ground around Shinji and Zyuu rises, wrapped in black like a cup, rising through the air, past the shifting black mass, past the bone lined red core, and finally coming face to face with the metal deaths head grimace. Deep within it, the eyes glow like twin crimson suns.

And the black mountain speaks in thunder.

"***Ikari.***"

Shinji slowly rises, standing between his sister and the Arm of God.

"***You have become an annoyance.***"

...

A rush of air, and it lands in a crouch. Holding the replica lance in one hand, its other hand surrounded by orange liquid light, the True Evangelion rises to its feet. Sensing the new prey, several of the

Camaeli swarm rise, flying towards the blue and black Evangelion.

In the Entry Plug, Kaworu sighs, sensing the rage, the mindlessness of them. He knows, of course. That this Cherubim is the reflection of Matariel, and would not be surprised if it holds resentment towards him.

He slew Matariel, after all.

Stabbing the lance into the ground, the Mark-06 raises its hands. The visor glows steady orange, seven wings of orange light folding out from behind the god machine. A sphere forms around the Camaeli, locking them in place as if trapped in amber. A steady hum builds, a faint sound of clapping wings in the wind.

And then they are gone.

"*Kaworu!*"

The Mark-06 turns to see Zwei walking over, covered in red LCL sticking like honey, a torn off stinger in its hand.

"Uri," Kaworu says, and smiles, "It's good to see you again. Are you well?"

"*More or less. Where did you send them?*"

"The Photosphere. I don't think their AT Fields will protect them there, at least," he says, as the Mark-06 once more hefts up its lance, "Come. We have more to deal with before this day's over."

The replica blade extends into a lance, the Mark-06 holding it in both hands before it. And thrusting it forward, impaling one of the Camael on it, the True Eva wades into the fray.

...

"***You have become an annoyance. You once more are brought into our mind and your flail like an animal, without purpose. Your kind struggles with inevitability, like dust on the cosmic wind.***"

Zyuu hides behind him. The voice booms like thunder down the mountainside, deep and reverberating.

"***Your mad god sees this as a victory. Seeing the truth. Seeing the***

existence your kind was not meant to experience. But even now she sees the inevitability of fate as it grinds towards destruction. Even now, she sees that hope for her brood is lost."

Somehow, Shinji finds his voice.

"H...how?" he asks, "I thought we killed you. We blasted you with...that explosion from the Dirac!"

"***The beings you term 'Angels' are not mere corporeal beings. We exist. The death of a physical body no more destroys us than the severing of a limb destroys you. We are-"***

A roar, and the Camael Queen lunges at Zeruel, hissing through blood covered jaws as it brings its teeth and claws down upon the tendrils of the Angel. Tendrils wrap around its head and neck before the Cherubim is yanked upwards and slammed into the ground.

"***Silence. Abomination."***

...

Inside the Entry Plug, Kaworu feels the presence. Something is happening. As the lance stabs through another of the Camaeli, he feels the tugging presence. It is familiar...but not possible. Zeruel is not at his full power. He is still restrained, the remaining fragment of his Core encased in machines in Berlin.

The Mark-06 extends its hand. A sphere of energy appears, tightly wrapped AT Fields formed into a ball, which launches. It penetrates a Camaeli's head, emerging from the stinger, and the bee drops dead to the ground.

One more down. Only about five hundred more to go.

A glance at Uri's cockpit. He sees the wince. Of course, he does not know of the Overmind, yet. He will have to introduce his brother to those who remain...if Uri can accept the truth about himself that easily, that is.

Artillery batteries come to life. The AT Fields of the insects are hammered from all sides, the missiles and shells hammering them from every angle, distracting them before cornering them, herding them towards the Evas. Which the Camael don't realize before Go-kun

and Zwei descend on them.

"Ah, good idea," Kaworu says, "Now we just need to find the Core."

...

The flickering and buzzing dies down, as Zeruel turns back to the two Lilim before him. The cupped ground rises, inches from the maw and mask of the Angel of Might. It is massive, Shinji muses. Even when it first attacked NERV, when it came face to face with him deep in the bowels of Headquarters, it did not seem this big.

"How are you still alive?" Shinji asks.

"***Some things are not fated to die, Ikari. Not before their time. Our time is coming soon."***

"Soon?" Shinji asks, "What do you mean, soon?"

"***I have been given a revelation."***

The voice echoes and reverberates.

"***I have had your power, your 'technology' explained to me."***

The bird shaped sun in the sky flickers. The deep red suns in the crevices of the masks' eyes glow.

"You...I thought Angels didn't understand technology..."

"***Technology is the curse of the Black Seed. Your ability to destroy yourselves. That which you term 'angels' have no need to flame, for we are invincible against the elements. We have no need to create weapons to hunt with, for we are built within our own methods of war. We have no need to destroy ourselves, for we are eternal."***

"So...you're...learning?"

The thought does not give Shinji any sense of relief. Even if some of them have learned- such as Junior, and Lilly, and even the Israfim, he doesn't like the idea of something like the one in front of him knowing the difference between him and his Eva.

"***The abominations you term 'cherubim' are mere animals. You are fools to fear them. They are beasts which lash out, unable to***

comprehend. Or learn. It is time you are reminded which of us you are right to fear."

A faint shape on the wind, in the air. Shinji can see a shadow on this world, but still keeps his attention on the Angel before him. Zyuu is shaking behind him, hiding to escape the gaze of the monster.

"***We shall meet again, Ikari. When we do, you will be at the helm of the weapon you used to humble Father. We will have the battle we were meant to. Fate will not be denied. Songs will be sung of the carnage that shall be wrought. The end of this age shall be decided."***

The Angel turns, to the twitching queen of the Camael. His eyes glow and a lance of pink light stabs out, the Camaeli screeching before it explodes, a cross shaped, rising cloud of gas and fire dominating the angelic plane. Zeruel turns back to them. The glow of his eyes hangs over them like twin red stars.

"***Prepare for my arrival."***

And then the world is gone.

...

"Sub Director! The Blue Patterns are disappearing!"

On the Big Screen, they can watch as the giant bees hang in the air, flapping their now underpowered wings before dropping to the pavement below. The steady glow that accompanies them disappears, dropping them to the ground, shattering wings and stingers and proving them oh so vulnerable.

Missiles and artillery fire rip into them as Go-kun proceeds to open fire with his shoulder batteries, breaking through the natural armor of the massive creatures as Zwei begins cutting into them with his progressive knives.

The Mark-06 extends its hands.

"*Director Sohryu, if I may. NERV-Berlin is well equipped to study the Camaeli now that they are no longer an immediate threat."*

"Feel free, Kaworu," Pieter responds, tapping the mic control, "We'll focus on cleanup, here."

A sphere of orange manifests, wrapping around the Camaeli as Go-kun and Zwei step back. Is surrounds the Mark-06, surrounds the swarm of angelic bees, careful to bend around buildings and artillery, careful to only enclose the Evangelion and its targets. It turns opaque, humming, a solid structure of gold and red that rises into the sky.

And then there is a rush of air, and it is gone.

"Okay, that's that," Pieter says, "Let's clean up the grubs and hives. Get out the flamethrowers."

...

"Okay. Lilith?"

"**I am here, Ikari-kun.**"

"That's just creepy. Please don't call me that."

"**No.**"

A sigh. Which is odd, because he can't tell if he has a body, right now. He can sense, however, that is is not just him and Lilith, or little Lilith, here with him.

"Zyuu?"

"Oi."

"Good. Wanted to make sure we're all here...say, Zyuu? Can I ask a question? What did Mom mean when she said 'learn to speak proper French?' I thought you do speak proper French."

"Oh. Well, I don't."

"You don't? Then...how do you..."

"I memorized the translation program they use online, and use it to translate whatever I want into whatever language I want! So I can speak any language at all! V*ous utilisez ce programme de manière incorrecte. Je gebruikt dit programma verkeerd.* 말해이 명확주세요. See?"

"..."

"**...what.**"

"You...memorized Google Translate?"

"*Oi.*"

"Zyuu, wouldn't it just have been easier to *learn French?"*

"...not sure what you mean there."

"That's *stupid."*

"No, you're stupid!"

"Am not!"

"Non, vous êtes un crétin stupide fait de stupide!"

"**Ikari-kun.**"

"Oh, right," Shinji sighs, the exasperated tone in the splinter of the Progenitor becoming evident, "Okay. So, let's talk. Why don't remember that I have an aunt? Why didn't my Mom ever mention her? And why did she *act like Rei?"*

"I found that odd, too."

"**Because.**"

"Because *what?*"

He tries to shrug, which is pointless when bodiless.

"Why, though? You...you've been watching my family, haven't you?"

"**Yes.**"

"Why?"

"**The war must end, Ikari-kun.**"

...

Cage 3.

Two people run into the launch bay, technicians who's job it is to maintain the now frozen and locked down Mark-01 turning to see Commander Ikari and the twelve year old girl with brown pigtails

enter. They salute to the Commander. Those of the technicians present who know who the girl is salute to her, too.

"Halt defrost on the Mark-01," Gendo orders, "Ichi?"

"Ready," the girl says, rolling her neck with an audible whir.

"You're *sure* this is going to work?"

She nods, smiling.

"And..."

"And I promise I won't try to break out," she says with a sigh, "I really wish I was grown up last time Mom took me to the beach..."

She closes her eyes. Her body goes limp, Gendo catching it with a grunt. He needs to talk to the girls about making Ichi a lighter avatar body.

But that is not the technicians' concerns, as the Mark-01's eyes glow deep cobalt blue, the entry plug set halfway into its neck whirring and sliding in.

"*Fits like a glove!"* Ichi's voice booms, now through the speakers built into the Evangelion's shoulders, "*Little chilly, though. Okay. Right. S2 organ coming to power, I've got my connection to the Big Momma going strong. It's deeeeee-tanging time!"*

...

"Coming in on the signals, now," Maya reports, Aoi and Megumi, two of her fellow bridge staff, behind her. In one hand, she has her PDA, the screen set to flashlight mode, her other hand holding a pistol. She can hear the Section-2 personnel behind them, their flashlight mounted assault rifles ready.

"Sub Director, we're coming in on the signals. Naok00 reported a few got out of her traps."

"*Understood, Ibuki. Pinpoint the location and we'll have the defenses do the rest."*

A sound, like slithering flesh on walls, clattering of teeth. Maya flattens her back against the corner, the other two bridge bunnies next

to her as she brings up and undoes the safety on her gun. A careful hand signal to the two technicians and the two guards, and she bursts out of the corner, gun raised...

And pointed at half a Camael grub.

Ah. Hello.

Aoi begins gagging, Maya tilting her head as Megumi turns pale. The other half of the Camael grub is currently in Junior's mouth as the Sandalphin chews, a sound much like a coffee grinder at full power.

Several not moving grubs are at the base of his tail. Given, they aren't sure what they look like when they're alive, they can't tell what killed them. Although the blue splotches on the wall seem to be a good indication.

"Junior?" Maya asks, "What are you...doing?"

Aiding with cleanup. Would you like some?

He holds up a dangling, twitching grub leg.

They're quite delicious.

A retching sound, as Aoi's gagging gives way to full vomiting.

"No," Maya says, "No. No no no. We're fine."

Understood. By the way, Lieutenant. Have you seen Lilly?

Maya shrugs.

"I'm...sure that she'll show up. I...wouldn't be surprised if she hid when the bees appeared."

Junior nods, quickly sucking up the rest of the grub. Grinding it in his maw, he closes his mouth, swallows, and belches, before picking up another inert grub and resuming his meal.

...

The massive bee continues stabbing with its stinger, bouncing off the orange field held by the two MP Evangelions as the third continues spraying the gas at it. The eight MP Evas, under the direction of the

Mark-06, have managed to sedate the majority of the Camael swarm. Well, eight of the nine.

The ninth is off in the corner of the massive hangar, while Kei comes down onto one of the high level catwalks and takes out the megaphone.

"*Omega,"* she shouts, "*Help your Daddy subjugate the giant bees!"*

"**NO! ICKY!"**

In the entry plug, Kaworu sighs, continuing to close the AT fields around the Camaeli as more drop into slumber.

"Perhaps we should consider more Avatar bodies for them," he says to himself, "It would be nice to spend more time as a family. Outside of giant robots."

...

"You've been watching my family, haven't you? You...were Meredith, weren't you?"

"**A portion of myself was her. She influenced the choices of your mother. She ensured that your mother chose the sciences. We saw that your family held the highest probability of bringing about a satisfactory end to the war between ADAM and myself.**"

"How?"

"**Your family lived in what is now Tokyo-3. Your grandfather owned a house in the Hakone region. I visited him in dreams. I told him how to create her.**"

"Then why doesn't anyone remember her?"

"**...**"

"Well, that *sucks,*" Zyuu says, "I wanted an aunt. I mean, another aunt. It would've been fun to have an Aunt like us. :C."

"How can you do that? I mean, Rei can do that, but it makes no sense!"

"**Yes. :P.**"

"What the f_? How do you *do that?* I'm a Lilithian nephilim do, and I can't! D:! F_!"

"**That was what you needed to see. You needed to see the consequences. You needed to see the connection. And I needed to restore you to human, so you could do what you had to do.**"

"And then what?"

"You will see. You will do what you must. You will-"

"Consider letting them go right now, howsabout?"

The world forms, given substance. Shinji and Zyuu find themselves standing on something, Lilith floating before them. And floating above them now, blazing like a new day sun, is-

"Ichi!"

"Hey there, bro," Ichi says, grinning, "I got Dad to give me the keys to the giant robot. Sorry to interrupt, Top Half, but we're going to be going home, now."

...

The eyes of the Evangelion glow bright blue. The low throb of the Core cracks the ice and bakelite surrounding the Mark-01, a steady glow from its chest as it does its work. The back of the neck retracts, the plate revealing the Entry Plug as it spins out, drains, and opens.

And clad in a plugsuit, Shinji climbs out, spitting out a wad of LCL as he walks up to Gendo, who stands at the end of the catwalk with his hands in his pockets.

"Thanks for the plugsuit, Dad."

"I figured you didn't want to be in an enclosed space naked with Zyuu."

...

Eyes open with a groan. Mana sits up to find Misato leaning on the doorway of the room, clapping her hands as Mana raises an eyebrow.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, the teenage cyborg bounces to her feet, then catches the side of the bed to keep from falling.

"Good work," Misato says, "We didn't get any major infiltration, *and* you herded the giant bee things to where we could deal with them."

Mana shrugs, rolling her neck.

"It was just like plugging into Jet Alone. Wasn't anything major, ma'am."

"Nah," Misato says, "I'd say it was. Say, I wanted to ask you something."

Mana nods.

"Yeah?"

"Sohryu's maybe figured out what's wrong between you and Unit-07," Misato says, "And it means you might not be the best pilot for it. So, since we might not have you pilot...what you think about transferring into Tactical?"

...

And deep in Sheol, still in her enclosed room, still clad in a white shirt, Lilith narrows her eyes. Something, she muses, may be wrong.

"**Ah,**" she says, as the door closes, "**I may have...miscalculated.**"

...

"We may have miscalculated," the [ANCESTOR] says, hands on either side of Lilly as the Lelielim trills happily, "Just...all of these memories are errors. Nothing worked like it should have. Kemuel hasn't even activated..."

The pulsing white tree of Cahethal remains silent.

"Four and a half billion solar rotations and this hasn't been resolved," the not-Shinji says, "That's...unthinkable. The Black Seed on the Planet*3 is working in a cyclical format and *should* have landed on

Planet*4, the White Seed Progenitor has lost direct control of the Terraforming Apparatus...you should not be operating independently!"

He releases Lilly. The sphere rises, floating up to eye level of the [ANCESTOR].

:] ?

"No, it's not that," he says, hands thrust into his pockets, "It's...there's a serious problem. ADAM is not functioning properly. Lilith is not functioning properly. This should have all been resolved at least two billion solar rotations before and it hasn't. The White Seed has been functioning for far too long and the Black Seed is not functioning properly *at all.* Even the activation of the [FAILSAFE] systems isn't working. I need to send a report out. A countermeasure has to be activated. Do you understand?"

8}.

"Good. You have time to fix it, but if you don't, well...we tried. Thank you."

A pop, a brief rush of air into the Dirac, and Lilly is gone. The form of the [ANCESTOR] fades, becoming discorporeal once more, but Cahethal remains.

And what, may I ask

Will be the fate of the Seed?

I have watched them

Nurture themselves,

And even seen the possibility

That peace

Is possible between them.

If coexistence is possible, it means they can achieve some sort of balance. If it isn't, it puts the entire planetary system in danger. We've seen it happen too many times. If it is necessary, the entire system will have to be restarted.

The tree of life flickers. If such a thing were evident on it, it would show...regret.

I understand that

Such things may be necessary.

I regret that it may be the case.

But somethings are

Greater than individuals

Or what makes them.

A sigh, in the boundless ether.

Life is important. Life begets life. Sentience is good, but it can come in time. We must do what we must. [ANCESTOR] maintenance program returning to sleep mode. Good night, Cahethal.

Goodnight, watcher,

May you dream of balance

And peaceful coexistence.

A silence falls once more onto the Dirac. And Cahethal folds upon itself once more, and silently wades into the streams of between space, to watch, and wait, once more.

...

Report sent.

Biological situation critical.

Progenitor-class Seedforms:

Emergency repair needed.

CONTROL-Type Seed requested.

Designation: [RED MOON] activated.

Transit time:

20 Planet*3 Solar Revolutions.

End Report.

...

It was late at night when everything was finally resolved, and everyone went home to sleep. The next morning, at the Ikari household, the doors open and Yui Ikari enters with a sigh, dropping her purse at the table by the door and stumbling into the apartment. A note on the fridge, written in Gendo's handwriting, succinctly summing up what happened. Of course, she got the details from Ritsuko, including the whole 'Shinji and Zyuu got eaten by Lilith but they're better now,' explanation.

She stumbles over to the bedroom, opening the door to what was Rei's room. Shinji is sleeping on the bed. Merrill is on his chest, Ichi's deactivated avatar on the foot of the bed. She has to talk with both of them, especially since it was Ichi's quick thinking which prevented a disaster.

A sigh, and she sneaks off, to change, to check her messages, to maybe take a day off and relax-

And to react to the ear-splitting scream from the floor below. She runs to the stairs, running down them. Gendo is already at NERV, and Shinji, she hears, is scrambling out of bed. She runs into the large apartment below their own.

The girls are gathered at the bathroom. Pushing past them, she sees what they are gathered for, the Ree quiet as they watch with wide eyes. Zyuu, standing at the sink, mouth open. It is then that Yui realizes something. What got the attention of her sisters, and made her scream.

There is *color* in those normally pale cheeks.

Shinji skids to a stop next to her. The cat is clinging to his back, and Yui alternates her gaze between her pale, blue haired son, and the daughter standing at the sink.

Zyuu slowly turns to her. Her mouth opens and closes. Her fingers twitch, and when she turns to her mother, it is then that Yui sees *green* eyes staring back at her.

"*Zut alors,*" Zyuu says.

And promptly faints.

Chapter 97: Is on a Horse

The door opens. Her pigtails pulled back into a single ponytail, the sixteen year old girl cocks an eyebrow at the present assemblage, folding her arms and pursing her lips.

"Well, then," she says, "I was wondering when you would show up again. Finally got some time in your schedule?"

Shinji sighs. Shoulders slump and he rolls his eyes, going through the motion of pretend disapproval and pretend frustration, even if his heart isn't in it.

"Sorry," he says, "I sort of got eaten by an Angel."

Hikari's eyes go wide. She starts to speak, but her demands to know what happened are silenced by Mari smacking Shinji upside the head.

"Ixnay on the Angtay," she says.

Hikari mouths a question, but is silenced by Rei, who lolls back and forth on her heels.

"Weee~ell sorry about us missing our game sessions, Hikari," Rei says, "But I've gotta miss this one too. I've got my first support group meeting with my mind***babies*** and Mari said she'd take care of my character this time around, 'kay? I really gotta thank you for playing games with them, too. They've had a *lot* of fun."

Rei waves, and steps back, dropping over the railing and off the apartment complex. Shinji tries to muster concern, more concerned by how blaise he's become about this sort of thing. At least Rei is being innovative and not just using ducts.

Hikari sighs, and leads them in. At the low coffee table in the middle of the Horaki residence, there's some people already gathered. One of whom Shinji recognizes off the bat. A glance between him and Touji is exchanged.

Oh, right. You're here, too? Well, it makes sense that you're here, we're all friends here, even if we haven't really talked much since you almost got mauled by a crab.

It is a verbose glance. Very verbose.

The other girl, Shinji does not recognize. A girl with long, straight black hair and glasses, dressed in a sweater and long skirt, who smiles to Mari and Shinji as they enter the living room.

"Shinji," Hikari says, "This is my old friend, Mayumi Yamagishi."

The girl waves, slightly, hesitantly.

"It's...good to meet you," she says, and coughs, "Sorry. I've...uh...heard a lot from Hikari about both of you, but I've been...out of school for a while."

Shinji scratches his head, nodding.

"Uh...yeah," he says, "Good to meet you, too."

A purr and mew, and something raises its head from under the table. That something, however, is soon revealed to be a cat with orange and white fur, mewing happily as it sits up on Mayumi's lap.

"Oh, that this is my cat," Mayumi says, "Say 'hi,' Zophie."

The cat mews. Shinji, wisely, takes a step back.

Chapter 97: Is On a Horse

Four 2' high avatar bodies, officially from the Lil'Rei set of the Little Pilots of NERV advanced doll line, are assembled on the catwalk in front of the four eyed armored face of the red and white Evangelion. Standing off at the entrance of the Cage 02 facility, Uri shuffles back and forth, nervously tugging at the collar of his uniform.

"Sooo~ooo~oo in Australia we had to leave all of our supplies," the Reego with the I emblazoned on her says, "Like the boxes of stuff and things and stuff that we had for survival but not for us but for the people who had to survive because they couldn't swap out body parts."

Zwei inclines his head, then retracts. A nod. Understanding.

"An' so the stuff that's for the things who need the stuff are on the road in the desert. Not that desert, the other desert. It's right by the large angry animals and the giant platypuseseseses."

Another nod from Zwei. Uri hopes this doesn't go on for too much longer. Zwei's a sweet soul and doesn't deserve to be broken.

"**Kay,**" the evangelion booms.

"Heee~ey."

Uri turns. Dressed in her school uniform, Rei flashes a toothy, carnivorous smile.

"Ayanami," he says, "Please don't let the Reego drive my Evangelion insane."

"'Kay."

She puts two fingers in her mouth and whistles.

"Oh mind***babies!*** Time to go!"

The four Reego turn.

"'Kay, Momma," Duae says, "We were just tellin' Zwei about Australia! An about the Blue Ringed Sharktapus and the Man Eatin' Sheep and the Giant Rabbits and the Plasmaroo and the Killing Tree!"

"**Sounds like ANGEL! Want to FETCH!**"

The four avatar bodies hop down from the catwalk, following their mother/source/blerg out of the Cage. Zwei nods again, then leans back to his normal resting position, the dim light in his eyes shutting off as he returns to sleep mode.

...

"Ichi, you are aware there are colors other than purple and green, right?"

A sigh, from the mother of the two daughters. The day got off to an auspicious start, beginning in the bowels of NERV and in Cage 3, as Ichi confirmed exactly what happened, and cryptically talked about 'stabilizing' things. Well, no. That was *three* days ago, since Yui got back from Okayama to immediately run a panicking Zyuu to NERV. Everyone followed, of course.

The Ree were all nervous and probably frightened by the whole thing, save for Iti. She was more curious and took notes on the whole situation, which she checks on her PDA. But, the conclusion, especially as her hair turned from blue to brown with some blue

streaks, was more or less air tight.

Zyuu's Lilithian DNA had by and large been replaced with DNA sourced from one Gendo Ikari. Zyuu had gone from Lilithian Nephilim to Human over the course of three days.

What's problematic, though, is that they went down to Lilith in Sheol. *She* had no idea why it was happening to Zyuu.

"This *sucks.*"

The proclamation catches Yui's attention. Stumbling through the clothing store, struggling to carry the cart full of clothes, Zyuu is dressed from head to toe in a sweatsuit, heavy jacket, scarf and hat. That, Yui can guess, is over her normal french maid outfit.

"Zyuu?" Yui asks, cocking an eyebrow.

"It's cold!"

"It's september. It doesn't turn cold for three weeks."

"No, it's cold now," Zyuu says, her reddish green eyes mostly hidden by the scarf she speaks through, moving up and down like mask, "I'm cold! I've never been cold!"

Yui sighs, closing the PDA and pocketing it. She had to explain to Kiko this morning, after they all got home, that no, *Zyuu was not dying, she just was full after one bowl of porridge.* Walking over to her daughter, she pulls her into a hug, rubbing her on her back. The best thing they could do, they decided, was do something relaxing, like clothes shopping.

And at very least, she can really baby her and Ichi for today, while Asuka figures out what in God's name is going on.

...

"So...I...uh...wanted to thank everyone for coming today. I'd like welcome back Rei, and her children, and I'd also like to welcome the father of Rei's children. This is Gokun, and he's..."

"**It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Takagawa.**"

The middle aged woman, her black hair already turning gray, looks up

from the seated albino teenager to the grilled face of the fifteen foot tall robot in front of her, hands folded on his lap as he sits in the heavily reinforced mount/chair.

"Yes," she says, "Yes. It is."

She clears her throat. One of the blue haired, red eyed girls is still giving her dirty looks, but has been ever since that spider incident a few days ago, before the Angel attack.

Rin Takagawa clears her throat, and smiles, turning to the other teens in the repurposed classroom, folding chairs arranged in a circle. She sits, for lack of a better term, at the head, opposite from the...father...of Ayanami's odd children, which probably explains some of her concerns about Ayanami's children, and clears her throat again just as a cry rings out.

A mousy girl with glasses and black hair tied into hastily arranged pigtails looks up from the bundle in her arms.

"Um...M-Miniko needs a d-diaper change."

"That's okay, Kana," Rin responds, "Katya, can you help her?"

One of the other adults present, a blonde, eastern european woman a few inches shorter than she should be, nods, leading the perpetually downtrodden girl to the restrooms. Clearing her throat again, she turns to the star attraction of the meeting, if only because of size.

"Well, it's not often that we have...guests...like you, Mr. Gokun," she says with a smile, "So, tell us about yourself."

...

The pink crystal sphere folds upon itself. Turning into a swirl of pink powdered crystal, it reforms in a blink of an eye into a long crystal sliver, light gathering at its tip as a long, high pitched trill vibrates from it. The light lances out into a red beam, invisible to the naked eye and ending in a red spot on the floor.

The white furred paw comes down on the spot, just as it moves. With a confused mewl, the cat pounces as the spot steadies on the floor, claws out to kill. And then the spot moves to the wall. Mewling, the cat braces, and launches herself at the prey.

"Yeah," Mari says, as they watch Zophie chase the red light, courtesy of one of her Ramielim, "That'll keep her busy for a while."

Mayumi turns from her occupied cat to Mari, looking across the set up gaming table at the other token glasses wearing girl.

"I should get one of those," she says, "What is it?"

"NERV tech," Shinji quickly interrupts, coughing, "So...where were we?"

Hikari clears her throat. Touji is wisely silent, and the sweater wearing new girl, whom Shinji chastises himself for being suspicious about, simply watches her cat playing with the Ramielim...or Marielim, one would guess. Of course he doesn't know about her, he tells himself, he just came to Tokyo-3 a few months ago.

No need to be paranoid because you don't socialize, he tells himself.

"Well, we were just about to get back to business," Hikari says, "Mari, what do you do?"

Mari bites her lip, an expression Shinji would find cute if this was not his girlfriend's sister. Then again, he does find that expression cute on his girlfriend, so that's not a problem. Given, neither of them have talked about their little adventure in Ramiel days ago, where Mari's subconscious tried to give him a bad touch, but he doesn't really find himself alone with her at all.

"I attack!" Mari declares.

Touji sighs. Mayumi tilts her head.

"This is social combat," Hikari explains.

"And I'm playing Rei's character."

"Point," Hikari says, "Okay, so you pull out your Maser Daiklave. That's four dice. Touji?"

Touji reaches for the large metal bucket, taking out four dice and handing them to Mari.

"Dex plus Melee and surprise...eight more dice."

Touji tips over the bucket, shaking them out.

"Right," Mari says, "And I'm buying six more dice with *Holy Wrath of Malfeas* and shouting *For the Emprah* while I cleave into the banquet party..."

"Eight more dice, Touji."

Touji sighs, nodding as he knows what's good for him.

"So, where is everyone else?" Mayumi asks, as a tired Zophie stumbles back to her and collapses next to her, rolling onto her back and demanding belly rubs.

"Asuka's at NERV on one of Mom's projects," Shinji explains, "Rei's got her support group, and Mom's out shopping with Zyuu and Ichi. Uri's at NERV, to. Something about cross testing with Mana's Eva."

...

"So, just to be clear, we're doing this for all the Evas. Right?"

Shrugging into the shoulders of her fitted NERV uniform jacket, Mana resists the urge to pick at her wedgie as she stands next to her superior in the Prinbow box overlooking Cage 06.

"That's the plan," Misato says, "Uri's going to synch with 07 now, and when Shinji reports in tonight we're going to synch the both of them with Go-kun, Shinji with 07, and then with Zwei."

Mana nods. Her hair is freshly cut, her limbs still feel lighter than normal, and she shifts in her stance in her beige uniform and pants.

"Any chance I can dress casual, like you?" she asks.

Misato smirks, clad in her bomber jacket and dress.

"Nope."

"Why's that?"

"You need a chest to show off, first."

Mana snorts, smirks.

"Fair enough," she says, "Well, anyway, I look at it this way. JA-Tan's based off my subconscious, so she's kind of me. Either way, Uri's going

inside me. Mission accomplished."

"That's the spirit, Mana. Keep optimistic," Misato responds, hand over her mouth to disguise the chuckle, "Maya, start the procedure."

A click as the speakers come on line.

"*Deploying smooth jazz in three...two...one,*" Naok00's voice purrs, "*Deploying."*

Jazz music begins playing over the speakers. A small video screen connected to cameras shows the mostly frozen Mark-01 bobbing its head back and forth.

"I think *someone* has been abusing her video game privileges," Misato says.

The music stops with a sound like a scratching record.

"Starting entry sequence," Maya says with a put-upon sigh.

...

"*Starting entry sequences. Releasing neck musculature locks and setting interface language to german."*

Sighing, Uri rolls his hands over the controls. It is...different...being in an Eva other than Zwei. He is used to Zwei, feels connected to him. This feels different. More antiseptic. Zwei is like a comfortable jacket, a familiar feeling, a warm sweater. This is like a starched coat. New, shiny. But not broken in.

"*Stage two. Plug Depth set at 1.09. LCL ionization commencing.*"

Another screen opens up in his right eye, one of Prinbow Box 5, set over Cage 03. Mother appears in it, at the diagnostic computer.

"*Uri, please keep in mind that JA-Tan's personality is based on Kirishima's."*

"I will, Mother. Believe me, I will."

"*Good. Also, Dr. Ikari informed me that her brother and his family is coming to Tokyo-3 this afternoon. That includes their daughter."*

He cocks an eyebrow. A subdued gesture, but that does mean Annette is arriving. He isn't sure how to think about that. While he has gotten some ribbing from Ikari about him dating his cousin, they haven't dated. He wouldn't even call Annette his girlfriend...is she his girlfriend? She's a girl and his friend, yes, but is there more than that?

"I...see," he says, "Thank you for telling me."

"*Of course, Uri. By the way, Ikari isn't able to pick up Ayanami from her support group. I wanted to ask you to do it."*

He blinks.

"Wouldn't someone with a car be better equipped for-"

"*Stage 3, Synchronization at 63%. Unit-07 is activating."*

The plug walls turn transparent. A soft breathing fills the plug, echoing in that place in the back of his awareness where he hears the beating of Zwei's Core. Instead, he hears humming on the wind, raising an eyebrow as he folds his hands on his lap.

"*Oh, hello there,"* a voice that sounds a lot like Kirishima, but lacking her hard edge, her gruffness, says, "*So...you're the first pilot? Hm."*

"...yes. I am."

"*Well, okay."*

A sigh.

"*I do have to apologize if Mana ever made you feel uncomfortable. I'd much rather keep our relationship professional if it's okay with you."*

"Yes it is. Trust me, it is."

He would not voice it to anyone, but one of his fears when he agreed to try piloting Unit-07 was Kirishima's subconsciousness giving him a bad touch. At least he didn't have to add an *Evangelion* to his burgeoning harem.

"*But...well, don't you have a higher synchronization with Zwei? Unless Miss Sohryu's going to pilot again, I guess. Still, I guess we can both work at this."*

...

"So, Miss Ayanami...Rei...I wanted to know if we could talk about your children."

Rin Takagawa clears her throat, the two the only ones remaining in the makeshift meeting room. She glances, to make sure that yes, the four...doll like children had gone to the playpit with her assistant, and their...father?...the giant robot they claimed was their father.

"Well...I've been wondering about your daughters," Rin says, "Can we talk?"

"Mm hm," Rei says with a nod. Still in her school uniform, hands folded on her lap, and a smile on her face.

"Well...you're sixteen," Rin says, "And I distinctly heard Una say she was seven, not six. And Duae said she was almost seven." The older woman sucks her lip. "...Did you want to talk about something? Did you ever feel...pressured...into..."

Her mind flashes back to the giant robot that Rei claims is the father, and how that *makes no sense.*

"...having children?"

"Ah," Rei says, glancing from side to side, "I...didn't really expect it, really. It sorta just happened. I mean, I thought I really liked him at first, 'cause he was big and strong and we complimented each other so well. And I wasn't sure if I really loved him, or just thought I loved him..."

"You were *nine,*" Rin says, a little too harshly.

Rei looks away, looks down as she starts rubbing the back of her neck.

"Um...no. No, I wasn't," Rei sighs, "Um...don't tell NERV I told you, 'cause you might not be cleared. But they're sorta AIs. Cause of something that happened a few months ago, and...um...I sorta had children. And they remember me and Go-kun being married and being happy and being a family and all this stuff that never really happened to anyone but them...and I kinda feel really said when they realize it wasn't real."

One does not go into the role of social worker, or at least succeed in that role, without certain characteristics. Among those are kindness, empathy, and the ability to think on one's feet. This is what Rin

herself excels at, her eyes going wide as the realization hits her.

"Oh," she says, "Oh. Oh. I see."

She rubs her hands together, and smiles, a warm sympathetic sight.

"Well, Rei," she says, "In all honesty, a lot of girls don't know what they want or what they're going to do with their lives, and suddenly they find they have children which now depend on them utterly. A lot of girls have the same situation you do. Do you want to talk about it?"

And Rin Takagawa, that moment, swore she could see gratitude in those red eyes.

...

"This sucks!"

Her feet, covered in layers of socks and a pair of fluffly slippers, drag. The anachronism of the situation would be amusing, if not for the fact that the girl is loudly complaining about it.

"I'm cold and I'm not hungry because I can't eat that much and *I need to pee really badly* and..."

Yui has worked out that the Ree don't need to eat as much as they do. Eating is a sensation for them, combined with their ability to store mass for emergency regeneration. Still, it is a pleasant sensation for them, and one of the reasons the girl are so quick to jump to humanity's defense is because in their minds, humanity = good.

"...I hurt my toe and my feet hurt from walking all day and I can't go through the ducts and this *sucks!"*

Standing outside the department store, Zyuu paces, scarf and heavy jacket over her as people walk by in short sleeved shirts and shorts. At the entrance of the department store, as Ichi makes a quick visit to the restroom, mostly because of the features the Ree built into the avatar body, Yui leans against the empty shopping cart.

"I know it does, Zyuu," Yui says, squeezing the pouting former Ree's shoulder, "Which is why Asuka's back at NERV and trying to find out what we can from whatever notes Naoko left. If we can fix this, we will. Want to stop for a milkshake?"

The pouting ends, an ear to ear grin splitting Zyuu's features.

"Yes, please."

A shadow across her features. A face like Yui's own turning sour, again.

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Yui says, and sighs, "This is traumatic. The fact that you're still walking around is something. I don't think if I woke up and found myself different from what I spent my entire life as, I'd be as willing to even leave my room."

"I got the bags!"

Balancing one of the oversized bags on her head, Ichi carries the rest out. Two oversized shopping bags, each about the size of her old, six year old self, in each hand, walking past customers at the exit of the department store in time to their wagons crashing into each other and drinks dropping to the floor.

Yui sighs, seconded by her hand splaying over her face.

It seems that yet another one of her daughters will require the 'what is appropriate in public' lecture.

...

"So, what do we have?"

Sitting back in his chair, hands steepled over his face, Gendo Ikari looks out from over his desk to the people before him. Always the cool presence, always the calm leader, he does not let anxiety show. After all, what happened is...unprecedented, to put it mildly.

"Here's what we know," Ritsuko says, hands clasped in front of her, as Maya brings up the hologram on the projector in front of them, "Zyuu's DNA was not just altered, it was changed. Unlike what we originally believed, she didn't just have the pure lilithian material removed from her body."

"Meaning?" Gendo asks.

"Meaning that her genetic identifiers now point to a mix of Dr. Ikari

and you, Commander."

"Meaning she's genetically similar to Shinji," Gendo responds.

"Identical, really," Ritsuko explains, "Almost. The eye color difference is apparently due to her inheriting eye color from Dr. Ikari. We could always theorize that if you had a daughter naturally, that child would have green eyes."

A grunt. Ichi has blue eyes, but Ichi's appearance is a psychological construct, not biological. He lets that pass.

"Your conclusions?" Gendo asks.

"We think it was an accident," Maya responds, "But on Lilith's part. We currently believe that Lilith intended to reverse Shinji's condition, but when Zyuu entered the construct, the intended reversal hit Zyuu, instead."

"Has Lilith confirmed this?"

Ritsuko and Maya look at each other, a glance exchanged as Maya grimaces.

"Lilith has gone catatonic," Ritsuko explains, "She's currently not reacting to outside stimulus. We're going over some ideas with Dr. Ikari on how to get her to respond, and we're discussing with Naok00 a way to hook her into an isolated MAGI VR environment."

Gendo nods, and grunts.

"I see. And what's the status on finding Naoko Akagi's notes?"

...

"*...And so when he wakes up, I'm going to have a long chat with Agent Kaji about how, if the person who runs the lab expressly invites you to look through everything in the base to find out about the assassination attempt, that means you don't have to sneak around like a spy."*

"When he wakes up?"

"*Almacia was overzealous with the chloroform for him and Makinami. He's sleeping off chloroform poisoning."*

"...I see. I don't think I'll pass that on to Misato or Kirishima. Well, with that updates, that's what's happened lately," Yui says, tapping her fingers together as she sits at her desk, "Asuka is going through the notes. She'll let me know as soon as she finds something."

"*Why aren't you?"*

"Because I'm desperate to find something. Asuka's more neutral than me on this, and won't fall for any obvious lures Naoko put in the data. If anything turns up, I might need you to come to Tokyo-3 to help. Is that alright?"

On the other end of the two way video call, Kei Ayanami nods.

"*I would be able to, Mom. I understand Ichi is now mobile?"*

"Yes. Your sisters built her an avatar body, now that she's matured and is coming out of her core," Yui says, and sighs, "Unfortunately, she is taking a little bit too much after your sisters. I think she could use more friends her own age. I mean, she isn't unsocial in school, but still."

"*I sympathize, Mom,"* Kei says, and sighs, a mirror image of her mother, "*Trust me, I do. I've been having trouble with the Keiwaru, myself."*

"Oh? I thought they were doing well."

"*They are, they are...they're curious, but without anyone closer to their age to interact with, they tend to go around the Internet and find their own fun. I just had to help a large segment of the girls get over something they saw. You see, they can easily override content filters...*

"So, that sounds perfect," Almacia, the vaguely malevolent 4 year old copy of Kei says, "*It makes perfect sense. We are four year olds, and there's a four in the web address of the site, and since 'Chan' is the feminine pronoun in Japanese, it must be made for four year old girls."*

The other female Keiwaru in front of her tilt their heads, as one in the back raises her hand.

"*Yes, 05 EF-05?*"

"*What does feminine, mean?"*

"*It means girly,"* Almacia responds, "*So, shall we go visit?"*

Many girly cheers, some not so girly from the very pretty male Keiwaru that have nonetheless been strongarmed into doing something with their sisters. Snapping her fingers, Almacia directs the mass of information that makes up the interface programs of the Keiwaru, thrusting hard through the throbbing internet pathways, and revealing to them...

"*What is this I'm four."*

And then they all start screaming.

Yui sucks her teeth.

"Oooooh dear."

"*Yes. I had to explain things too them. How the human body cannot bend like that, or fit those many objects...there. And how they aren't old enough to really wonder about that and now I'm wondering if AIs will go through puberty."*

Yui purses her lips.

"Will they go through puberty?"

Kei shrugs.

"*Possibly. I've seen signs that their intelligences mature, so their self-image may change. I'm not sure as of yet."*

Yui nods, sighing again. She's done a lot of that lately, when dealing with the varied and numerous problems her progeny have been presenting her with.

"Actually, Kei," she says, a smile slowly spreading across her face, "I think I have an idea..."

...

"This woman is f-fucking *insane.*"

Rubbing the bridge of her nose, Asuka leans back in the chair in front of the full wall MAGI terminal. The tape backup inside the SDAT, the music tape Shinji had during his formative years, contained a goldmine, mounds and mounds of data. But the problem is, there is no

index. It is random.

And there is so much porn.

Not just normal porn. This is all directed, fetish porn. Written erotica, written by the addled mind of Naoko Akagi, involving the Commander.

So she has, for the past five hours, been rifling through extensive scenarios involving her boyfriend's father.

"I th-think I am way t-too kinky if this isn't effecting me."

The door opens. A can pops open, a sound of fizz as someone chews on something soft. Like raisins.

"Jesus Christ," Mana says, "How horrifying."

She walks up, Asuka perking an eyebrow as Mana leans on her chair.

"I've seen some fucked up things in my time," Mana says, "But written bondage porn involving Commander Ikari takes the cake. Does he actually have that much bodyhair?"

"I wouldn't know."

Mana smirks.

"What about Shinji?"

Asuka blushes, turning beat red.

"He...isn't that hairy," she says, and turns back to the computer, "S-sadly, I can't f-find anything about the Ree here, so I have to keep looking."

Mana nods. She leans on the chair, looking over Asuka's shoulder, reading a particularly badly paced paragraph and grimacing. Something about bears. Sexy, sexy bears.

"So," Mana says, "Got a question. What kind of clearance do you have?"

"Um...level 2. Seraph-level," Asuka responds, "Why?"

Mana smirks. The conspiratorial smirk, the mischievous smirk.

"Well, since you're here, and you need a break from the hard core Beardman porn, I'm thinking...let's go MAGI surfing. I want to look up conspiracy theories."

...

The avatar body sits deactivated in the large swivel chair, eyes closed and head pitched forward, several wires leading to the access panel on the back of the neck. Humming to herself, Yui types up the commands on her keyboard, the lights in her office dimmed as the holographic projector comes to life, mapping a large 3d image of Ichi's face.

"*So! What's the plan?"*

"I'm sending you to the Berlin MAGI," Yui says, "I want you to introduce yourself to Kei's AIs."

"*Sounds cool. So I can meet people my own age, right?"* The digital face screws inc onfusion. "*But that's not right, is it? I mean, I'm twelve and they're mentally like 5 or 6 or 7 and chronologically a few months old, so I am still older than them."*

"Well, yes. It's also because, well, you seem to gravitate towards Shinji or the girls or the other pilots," Yui responds, sipping her coffee, "I thought you'd like to be the oldest one, for a change."

Ichi nods with a smile. From her perspective, the world shifts, becoming receding lines of information as she is transmitted at lightspeed through data pathways. The familiar recesses of a MAGI system appear around her, the vague redness of the overarching environment as she finds herself in the digital representation of a large field.

Around her also forms a stadium- a podium seats lining the circular construction. The seats fill, the stadium filled with hundreds of blue and gray haired children, all ranging in ages from 4 to 8, all wearing faces so very Ree like or otherwise very, very pretty. Especially the boys.

She finds herself standing at the center of the auditorium, on the stage, as the assembled AIs created by her sister, with a combination of her own neural data and that of her boyfriend, look up at her in hushed silence.

"Freakkin' beautiful," Ichi whispers, and waves, "Hi, boys and girls! I'm your Aunt Ichi! Who wants to learn how to be *awesome?"*

Chapter 98: The Calm Before

She stares at the phone, hands folded in front of her, not oblivious to the world around her but hyperfocused on the electronic instrument. It dares her. It mocks her, her indecision on the matter, on her past and how it has lead to the moment.

"Kyoko," Pieter says, leaning down, hands on her desk despite his own sense of self preservation, "Either you call her, or I do."

Kyoko scowls at him, before almost emboldened by his ultimatum, she grabs the phone, swatting his hands away from her desk as she turns to the screen and the internet search emblazoned on it. Tapping in the country code, area code, and number, she brings up the receiver to her ear and lets out a long, steady sigh...which ends when the line picks up and she hears a particular, albeit older, voice answer.

"Yes," she says, "I'm looking for a Miss Elisa Randell?"

A reply. Checking her world clock, it's still a reasonable hour in Germany.

"Yes, this is she?" Kyoko asks, "Ah, yes...um...this is Kyoko Sohryu. You worked for my mother and-...oh, yes. So you do remember me. Well...um..."

She pulls at the collar of her sweater, as Pieter smirks, arms folded.

"Yes, I know, I...well, I didn't talk with you much after my mother died. But...well, I'm getting married, soon. And I wanted to invite you to the wedding, and-"

Her eyes snap open.

"You'll come? Okay...well, I'll arrange for a flight, my company pay for it...and you have...you have grandchildren. Excellent, I would love to introduce them to my son and daughter and...oh, thank you. Yes. Yes. It's good to hear from you, too."

The phone clicks, the other person, her caretaker in those dark, formative years, hanging up. And Kyoko slams the receiver down, retracting her hand like it was burning.

"Was that so hard?" Pieter asks.

"Harder," Kyoko says, "Other than you and me, she was the only person at my mother's funeral. Even her coworkers couldn't bother to show up. But, considering the rancid evil bitch my mother was..."

She sighs, letting loose the long breath, the tension draining out of her.

"Well, there's the difference," he says, and leans in, "She drove people away. And you are a *better* person than she is."

He leans in, kissing her on the forehead, and she smiles, an unsteady and nervous thing on her lips, before she leans back. He is right. She was in danger of falling into the same trap her mother lived her life in. Her eyes wander to her desk, transformed over the past few months since the angel Leliel, now with pictures of her and Asuka and her and Uri and her and Pieter, pictures where her smiles become less forced and more genuine.

"Damned straight I am," she says, "Now, just to reassure you, Pieter. If you screw up the marriage this time, I will *cut* you."

He smirks, and salutes.

"Yes, *ma'am."*

Chapter 98:

The Calm Before

Before her are eight identical six year old children, each with blue gray hair and red eyes, their skin pale like her own sisters. And each of them, despite the fact that their voices are...well, not normal...are absolutely adorable.

"Okay," Ichi says, "Since you're all Evas and so am I, I think it's my duty to teach you the sacred art of Eva Fu."

She snaps her fingers. The world around her and the six years old shifts, becoming a field on a mountain top, surrounded by cherry blossom trees.

"Sweeet," Ichi says, rubbing her palms, "This is much better than the Tokyo MAGI."

"*Oh, that's because it's custom,"* Delta says, her voice like grating crystal,

"*Our Mom wrote the VR program."*

"Well, that's 'cause your Mom is like the smartest person in the world," Ichi says, ruffling the girl's hair, "'cept for maybe your Grandma, and maybe she might be tied with your Future-Aunt-Asuka. Anyway, since I have the most kills and I've been an Eva for 12 *years*, that should make me the Grand Master of Eva-Fu!"

She snaps her fingers again. Her clothes become a purple and green training Gi, a black belt tied around her waist. On the eight girls, white training Gis and white belts appear, save for **OMEGA,** who snaps her fingers and flowers appear on hers.

"**Aunt Ichi,**" Beta asks, "**How do we do Eva-Fu?**"

Ichi smiles, all teeth on display, and snaps her fingers. The light plays over a spot near them, forming into a human sized Sachiel, much like the one that Rei has stuffed and mounted in her closet. It looks around in confusion, shrugging at its lot in life.

And then Ichi kicks it in the jewels.

However, amongst Angels, a 'kick to the jewels' means something different from humans. Instead, Sachiel can only watch as Ichi launches herself feet forward at his Core with a shriek of "KIIIIII-YA!", burying her foot at the heel into the crystal before snapping a kick with her other foot to the same spot. The impact sends Sachiel flying, launching into the air before exploding in a cloud of flame, lightning, and sakura petals.

"*Pretty,"* Lambda says, her voice a hushed, dissonant shrieking as the other MP AIs clap and cheer, and go for their coloring pencils.

...

"Thank you again for taking the time for this interview, Commander. My viewers have shown interest in the inner workings of NERV, and hearing some explanations from the Supreme Commander would go a long way to easing some doubts the viewership has towards the war NERV is fighting on humanity's behalf."

The woman, middle eastern descend evident from her darkened skin and black hair, dressed in a two piece business suit and holding a tablet computer, the mounted video camera behind her flashing to life

as the light shines on Gendo. He blinks, and pushes his glasses up his nose.

"Shall we begin, Miss Al-Jilani?" Gendo asks, leaning back in his chair, the vastness of his office doing little to dissuade the reporter that somehow got on his schedule. Times like this he wished he actually told his secretary anything. Yui would do this, usually. But, she is busy babying the girls.

"Yes, Commander," the reporter responds, "Recently, some scrutiny has emerged from budget talks at the UN over NERV's rather large 'Evangelion Pacification' budget. Why do the Evangelions need this much pacification?"

"A happy Evangelion is an Evangelion that needs little other incentive. Next question."

"Is it true that NERV employs child soldiers?"

"NERV employs pilots who can operate an Evangelion."

"But are they minors?"

"NERV is given special dispensation by the UN, and identity of the Evangelions is public knowledge."

He resists the urge to steeple his fingers.

"Yes..." she says, and clears her throat, "Well, there is the question of who exactly NERV works for. Several conspiracy theories have cropped up. Especially one involving what appears to be a German cult. Do you have any comments?"

He suppresses the grin. He did publish that knowledge anonymously, using old screen names from his younger days. Mainly to highlight to the Old Men how ridiculous their entire plan was, from the outsider's perspective.

"Ah, yes," he says, and brings up his gloved hands for air quotes, "'SEELE'. The supposed collective of old men who somehow manage to wield enough influence to manipulate the UN."

He folds his hands again, leaning back.

"We have dismissed that claim."

...

Deep underground, in the forgotten layers between Man and God, it begins to stir. A formless mass, it will take shape and awaken, taking forms powerful and vast. It will bring terror and judgement to the world, as the eggseed begins to stir, and the first, feeling tendrils begin to take motive form.

And then there is the intruder. Half burnt, half destroyed, the metal grimace of the lilim-sized creature glows with red rage and flame. The red gem in its chest, its connection to its father, is half sundered, a hole the size of a lilim fist at its center.

The eggseed shifts, blades running over its form, as the monsters engage in battle for dominance. For survival.

And in the Amazon, the rings of light senses this.

The end time draws near, Armisael says, **The events we feared are at hand.**

And the Angel begins its march, silently advancing towards the city in the distance. In its wake, does the mass of humanity follow.

...

"I think your friend's an Angel."

Standing across from him in the kitchen, Hikari's face cycles through expressions as she digests the questioning nugget of information given to her by Shinji. First there is questioning, as she wonders whether or not he is serious. But then again, Shinji's not the type to joke around, so then she wonders if he's gone insane. Again. Like when he tried to blow up the school with a laser. Then there is disbelief that he could actually suggest something that stupid.

She'll settle on the last one.

"Seriously?" she asks, "You...what? Seriously?"

"I know there's an Angel that can mess with people's memories," Shinji explains, sipping at his canned coffee, "That Angel is named Zophael. Same as the cat."

"The cat's not named Zophael, the cat's named Zophie. Mayumi got her three days ago."

"Which is coincidentally when the angel attacked and got me eaten by another Angel."

Hikari throws up her hands, groaning.

"Shinji," she says, tilting her head, "Have you been talking to Sasoriko?"

"Who?"

"Girl in our class?" she asks, "Short, dark hair, conspiracy theorist...oh, wait. Of course not, since you barely pay attention in class and probably couldn't name anyone outside of me, Ken, Touji, and yours sisters."

"Um...Asuka and Uri?"

She glares at him. He shrugs, sheepish smile on his face.

"Mana and Mari?" he adds.

Hikari screws her lips, tapping her finger on the table.

"My point exactly," she says, "So, since you apparently came up with this idea *all on your own. What.* Seriously, what."

"I mean, are we sure she's real?" Shinji continues, "Are we sure she wasn't inserted into your memory by the memory eating Angel? They've done that before, and I wouldn't be surprised if they did it agai-"

The last word is cut off by her placing her hand over his mouth.

"Okay, Shinji, seriously, this is the sort of conspiracy theory I expect from Kensuke before your sisters ate his mind," she says, "Mayumi is my friend. She's been very sick for two years, she got that cat three days ago and she's feeling better. She is *not* an Angel, neither is her cat. And if you keep insisting that she is..."

She jabs him in the chest with her finger for emphasis.

"You will *regret it.* Clear?"

He nods. He sighs, scratching the back of his head.

"Yeah...looking back, that theory's stupid. Are we sure the cat isn't an Angel?"

"Shinji. What do we say around a new cat?"

"Uh...how long have you-"

"No. You say, 'It's a kitty.' Got it?"

The door to the apartment opens, loud enough to be heard in the kitchen, a cheerful greeting which makes Shinji's ears perk up.

The two walk out, just in time for Shinji to be tackle hugged by Ichi, who bounces off of him and skips over to the table where the others are sitting.

"Ichi, what're you doing here?"

"Asuka's busy helping Mom," Ichi responds, "So, she asked me to come join you! How do I play?"

Hikari perks an eyebrow, turning to Shinji as he rubs the bridge of his nose, a pained grimace on his face.

"Well, we should be glad," he mutters, "Someone sufficiently Rei like is now here. Ichi, have you played a pen and paper RPG before?"

"I'm a fast learner, 'cause all the girls in my family are geniuses and I must be one too."

She sits next to Mari, an audible whir as she waves at Mayumi and Zophie hisses. Ichi simply smiles back.

"Okay," Shinji sighs, "You can join us. It's just...you might not find this fun, Ichi. It might be...slower paced than you're used to."

Ichi shrugs with another slightly audible whir.

"Oh, I don't mind," she says, "I always have fun with Shinji. 'Specially when he's inside me."

...

"What about that?"

"Porn."

"Huh. Thought that was complicated or something."

"No. It's just complicated porn. See, she used differential calculus to determine the maximum amount of time she can hold her breath in reverse wheelbarrel position. It's s-still porn, but she's a scientist."

"Huh. What about this one. 'His throbbing manhood was the charge contained in the determined volume, and all he needed to do was divide by epsilon zero.'"

"Gauss Law," Asuka says, "Distribution of electrical charge, not metabiology. It's still science porn."

Asuka sighs, tapping on the page down button, glancing at the page, and tapping it again. She is become inured to this. Perhaps even immune. Or bored. She was originally horrified by this...

'"There was a non-zero chance that the particles which made up her body could have occupied any position in their light cone. But as it was, the quantum probability density was such that she was here, in his room, clad only in her lab coat. And she didn't need to multiply by her complex conjugate and then integrate over a volume to find that the next six hours were going to be oh so very...intense.

'You know,' she said, 'One of Maxwell's equations states that div dot B is always equal to zero. But you...you sexy, hairy beast, have just proven it wrong. Because I've found the magnetic monopole. And believe me, baby. It's all positive.'"

A sigh. Asuka rests her face in her hands.

"Mana, please don't read the porn out loud."

"Fine. How's that search coming up? We get any hits from the MAGIs?"

Asuka minimizes the window, bringing up the search window on the oversized flat monitor.

"Sweet," Mana says, leaning over her shoulder, "Okay, the JFK assassination was...done by a lone nutcase. Huh. Philadelphia experiment...didn't happen. Water fluoridation was a long term plan...to clean teeth. Damn it. Moon landing was real."

She snorts.

"Fuck, I could've told you that. I was deployed in orbit, and NERV-Luna's built near the original Apollo 11 landing sight. I've been there!"

"R-really?"

"Yeah. The SUIT's secondary function was an environmental exploration suit. Basically, I could use it as a space suit when it's fully sealed, and we tested it by having me do a moon walk. Check out Roswell."

"Huh. I've never been to the Lunar base. What's it like?"

"Very white. Very clean," Mana says, and shrugs, "Guys who work there are NERV. Popular belief about it being staffed by the NERV fuckups is wrong, though. They're eccentric, but just as committed as us fuckups down here."

Asuka nods, and turns back to the screen. Tapping at the keyboard, entering in passwords and code, Mana leans over her shoulder.

"Well?"

"H-hold on, I need to break through seven proxies."

"Well, hurry it up."

Asuka sighs. She can't blame Mana for being pushy and insistent. That would be like being angry at Rei for being Rei. She hasn't spent much time around her lately, though. Since Rei decided she wanted to be a mother, she's been busy, but she should make some time.

"Okay. There."

They both stare at the screen, reading over the report.

"So, Xavier Spencer's Dad crashed a experimental jet fighter and got the military to cover it up?"

"To avoid embarrassment," Asuka says, "Apparently."

"Huh. No aliens?"

"Nope. Just a crash."

Mana shrugs.

"Eh, guess one kind of alien's bad enough," she says, "Too bad. I was

rooting for more conspiracies."

"B-but we do have one. There was one that was t-trying to kill us in Vegas."

Mana nods, leaning against the chair.

"I know, I know," she says, "It's just...you know, it's not as fun when you're involved in it. I was hoping there were some we weren't knee deep in out there. So, how much sweet, sweet porn is left?"

...

"Okay, soooo lemme explain," Shinji says, clearing his throat as Hikari and Mayumi both glare at him, Touji leaning back and Ichi playing with the dice, "Hikari, remember how I told you Ichi was the AI of Unit-01?"

"Mm."

Not a concession. Not a response that counts as verbal. But it works.

"Well, we renamed it the Mark-01," he continues, "Nothing important, just a technical thing-"

"I became God."

"*You* became God," Mari says, rolling a pair of D8 dice in her hands, "Why does everyone forget *my* contribution?"

"Ignore Ichi, Hikari. She's just trolling you. And Mari? Opsec."

Mayumi blinks.

"Oh...kay..." she says, slowly, "Wait...AI? Like...artificial intelligence?"

"I'm genuinely intelligent," Ichi says, and smiles, widely, "Wait, if I'm a god, can I start a religion? I should *totally* get worshippers! And cathedrals! And tithes! Of cake!"

"Can I have the priests? I mean, I'm totally your co-god!"

"Shut. Up," Shinji growls, in the general direction of his sister and girlfriend's sister, "Well, the Mark-01 isn't...safe to use, so it's in lockdown. And Rei and her sisters made her a body...that is to say, a

body that is not sixty meters tall, so she could interact with the world like a normal person," Shinji continues, "Got that?"

"With you so far," Hikari responds.

Shinji nods. It's going well. Time for the next step.

"I wonder if Mom has the Pope's email address," Ichi says in the background, tapping her lip.

"And...well...Mom treated Ichi like her daughter, which, well, you know Mom and how she treats the Evas and Rei and the other Ree and just about everyone. So, Ichi's also my sister. And she based herself a bit off me since we talked a lot when I was six."

Hikari nods. Understanding in her eyes. Good. Nothing weird had to be discussed or said.

"And also 'cause I was based off the four week old fetus that Unit-01 absorbed when Mom first tried to activate it."

Shinji slumps forward, screaming as his forehead collides with some errant D4 dice. Everyone else turns to Ichi.

"It was going so well," Shinji moans.

"Okay, so, plausible deniability," Ichi says, "'Cause I'm really an AI and totally not an eldritch abomination."

Mari shifts, sliding slightly away from Ichi. Touji loudly sips his coffee.

"Yeah, I knew he wasn't doin' anything weird with her," Touji says, "It was either something technical, or he was cheatin' on Asuka."

"Ichi, I'm revoking your talking privileges, 'kay," Shinji says, and grimaces, "Okay. Crap. You're bringing out my reeishness because you can't keep your mouth closed..."

"And 'cause I'm the Avatar."

"Talking. *Not allowed."*

Hikari blinks.

"Wait...are we going to be abducted by NERV and injected with memory altering drugs, now?"

"It's...um," Shinji scratches the back of his head, "I don't think that happens."

"You mean you don't *remember* it happening," Ichi chimes in.

"Ichi, I have had it *up to here*..."

"Yep," Touji sighs, leaning back, "They're brother and sister, alright."

Muttering under his breath, Shinji stands. He grabs Ichi by the crook of her arm, and drags her out of the apartment, shutting the door behind them.

...

Exiting the elevator, Pieter only hears the click of the button before the spotlight shines directly in his face. Adjusting to the light, he blinks, grunts, and sees a suit wearing woman standing next to the spotlight.

"Director Sohryu," she says, "Khalisa Bin Al-Jilani, Tokyo-2 news. Can I have a minute of your time?"

Well, crap, he thinks with a grimace. But, this is part of his job at NERV. And if Pieter Sohryu prides himself on anything, it's professionalism.

"Okay," he says, "What questions do you have?"

"Well, Director, there have been some rumors about messy familial relations in NERV, so let's start with you," she responds, Pieter wincing, "Rumor has it that there's some controversy about the so-called death of your daughter. But, moving away from that, are the rumors that you plan to remarry Dr. Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu true?"

He clears his throat, clasping his hands behind him. No reason he can't look professional in this, after all.

"The rumors that Kyoko and I are remarrying are true," he says, "As for any rumors about Mari, I recommend asking Dr. Ikari or Dr. Akagi, as they know the circumstances better than I do."

"I see," she says, "And what about the video entitled 'Pieter and Kyoko make a Porno'? Is it an actual sex tape starring you and your former wife? What were the circumstances surrounding its release?"

...

Mari notices the changes first. Mayumi has started fanning herself with her character sheet, and Hikari's cheeks are flushing red. Crap, she thinks, Shinji's angry at Ichi, and Shinji getting angry equals *WHUMPA* aura.

"Okay, everyone keep calm," Mari says, standing, "'Cause if you don't, and either of you makes a move on my sister's boyfriend, I will *blast you through the wall."*

She turns to Mari first. Her eyes glow a baleful red.

"Got it, Rep?" she asks, "If you're sticking your tongue down anyone's throat, it's *his."* She points to Touji.

"Capece?"

She turns to Mayumi.

"I don't even know what you like, girl, but *taken* men is not one of them. Don't piss my sister off!"

Mayumi and Hikari both nod. A splash of water from the kitchen and a yelp, and a girl in her twenties, her white T-shirt soaked, stumbles out.

"Hey, Hikari," Kodama Horaki says, "I tripped or something. Where's that housebroken friend you had? You know, the blue haired one-"

"Shut. Up," Mari growls, eyes solid red, "No f_ing around! No screwing with my future brother in law!"

She turns to the cat.

"That goes for you, too!"

"F_ you, I don't even like him!" Zophie yells back, paws on the table. The dice drops from Mayumi's hand. Everyone freezes, and slowly looks over to the table to the cat sitting in Mayumi's lap.

"Crap," Zophie says, "Uh...Meow?"

...

"I think I've got a problem."

He found a bench in the hallway outside the apartment. She's sitting on the bench, feet swinging underneath her. Her cheerful demeanor and bubbly, nonstop babble is gone. Now she's mostly quiet, mostly pensive. The look on her face resembles the her he was used to. The Ichi she used to be.

And the anger Shinji felt begins to lessen, like a weight lifting off his chest.

"Okay," he says, "Tell me."

Another swing of her feet underneath the bench.

"I dunno what it's like to be twelve," she says, "I mean, I was one, and two, and three, and four, and five, and six, and now I'm twelve. I wasn't ever anything in between."

He sighs, sitting next to her. His hand finds itself on hers, squeezing it.

"Ichi, is that why you're acting like this?"

"Kind of," she responds, "It's...all my life, it's been Mom and Rei and Kiko and Zyuu and everyone else. I've never been around *people*, I mean really around them. I don't know why, but...maybe I just want to be *there*. I've been in the Core so long, and Mom always wanted to get me out, I guess I was looking forward to it so much and..."

His arm finds its way around her shoulders, pulling her into a hug.

"I'm sorry I was a jerk," she says.

"You're not a jerk," Shinji responds, "You're a *brat."*

"Which is why Mom loves me best."

"Brat."

They both sigh, leaning forward with their hands folded between their knees. Pursing their lips, they sigh once more and lean back on the bench.

"So, how bad did I screw up?" Ichi asks.

"Not too bad. At least Hikari doesn't think I'm a pervert. And I think

she just assumed you were rambling because, well, Rei."

"Yes, Rei. The solution to all our problems." Ichi purses her lips, and shrugs. "Yeah, I need to talk to someone my age, I guess. Or younger. 'Cause I had a lot of fun when Mom introduced me to the MPs."

He perks an eyebrow, leaning back.

"Em...Pees?"

"Kei's new AIs. They run the new MP Evangelions, and they're all patterned after six year olds and they're *adorable.*"

He blanches, turns from Ichi, and leans back.

"That's...is it really a good idea to put a six year old in charge of a sixty meter tall mecha?"

She shrugs, smiling.

"Worked for me."

...

Setting the last cup down next to the snoring Mayumi, Mari pours in the saki. Her eyes glow and a lance of pink vaporizes the liquor. She looks around to the sleeping Hikari, Touji, and Kodama, making sure they all have their cups which smell of alcohol. Padding over to her spot, she fills the cup and tosses back the drink, coughing and gagging.

"Man, I don't even get a buzz," she says, "That *sucks.*"

"Speak for yourself," Zophie responds, sitting next to Mari, dropping the can of sardines in front of her, "I even sip that stuff, and I *die.* So, edited memories of everyone so they think they got drunk, and they forgot I can, you know, speak. Also? Thumbs."

Mari nods, opening the sardine tin, pouring herself another cup of saki as Zophie begins eating the fish.

"How's the cat thing working out for you?"

"It's *wonderful,*" Zophie responds, leaning back against Mari as she downs another sardine, "They pet me, they feed me, they cater for my

every need. It's like I'm a *god.*"

"Or a cat."

"Hells yes. I gotta thank you and Rei for coming up with the idea. This is a much better way to watch you Lilim. While being pampered, taken care of, and oh wow I can now lick my own thigh."

And Zophie proceeds to do so.

...

"Tell me, Miss Ayanami. Do you ever intend to have children?"

Sipping on the yellow drink in her hand, Rei shrugs, looking up at Miss Takagawa. Sitting in the room upstairs, the windows overlooking the playroom below where Go-kun's avatar body is acting as an impromptu swingset for the Reego and the oldest other children, she lets her shoulders slump as she ponders the question.

"I dunno," Rei says, "I've never really thought about it. I didn't know what I'd do after the Angels. Maybe become a scientist, like Little Mommy."

Rin nods, sighing. She does a lot of that, ever since Rei joined her group. It may be a respiratory infection.

"But, if you ever had children," she adds, "Especially now? What would your parents do?"

Rei shrugs.

"Dunno," she says, "I think they'd like having biological grandchildren. But I don't think they're old enough to be real grandparents, yet."

Rin smiles, and nods.

"Well...believe it or not, Miss Ayanami, some parents don't react that well. Come, take a look."

She rises, walking to the window, with Rei next to her. Points to one girl, a lanky girl a little older than Rei, sitting on one of the benches and holding her bundle. She never smiles in the group, Rei muses.

"Keiko lives in a boarding house," Rin says, "Her parents kicked her

out, and her boyfriend- her baby's father- moved away from Tokyo-3. I helped her sign up for assistance, but she barely goes to school, and may drop out, soon."

Rin gestures to another, leaning against the window. Her face sets, her smile a line on her lips.

"Chidori lives with her boyfriend. She goes to school, but he dropped out and works three jobs. Neither of them will go to college at this rate. Lina doesn't know who the father of her child is. She doesn't talk about it or talk to anyone."

"Then...why?" Rei asks, "Why doesn't anyone help them?"

"There is a system to help them," Rin responds, "They have food stamps, welfare. The basics, but...well, Rei, you have NERV backing you. Anything happens to you, you have your sisters, and your brother, and your parents, and a whole organization. They could have given up their children for adoption, but they didn't. They took responsibility, like you are for yours. But there's only so much the system can do for them. Do you understand?"

Rei nods. Her teeth set, her ever present smile disappeared. Her hands ball into fists.

"Yeah," she says, her voice low, "But that doesn't mean I *like* it."

...

"That is a disingenuous assertation," Pieter responds, standing up straighter as he considers the question, "My personal life has nothing to do with NERV's efficiency."

"Still, some people do wonder whether the sub director of NERV can be trusted to hold authority over an ex-wife who he freely admits, and I quote from your earlier answer, 'wears the pants.' Doesn't NERV have a defined administrative structure?"

He tries to avoid sputtering out a response, but she's right. NERV always has been bad with defining who is in charge, or at least having the administrative wing defining who's in charge. For all the jokes that the Commander's job entails being a sounding board for his wife, it's an open secret that Yui Ikari rules with a velvet glove.

"Pieter, thank God! I need to punch someone!"

Speaking of which, Yui marches down the hall, the clapping of her sneakers on the metal hallway getting Al Jilani's attention as she quickly turns the mike from the befuddles sub director and towards the scientist.

"Dr. Ikari, Khalisa Bin Al-Jilani, Tokyo-2 news-"

"Not now," Yui says, walking past her and to Pieter, "Pieter, is Asuka still down in the labs? Has she found anything?"

"Dr. Ikari, is this Asuka the Miss Sohryu who used to be registered as the pilot of Unit-02-"

Yui whirls on her, finger up, eyes narrowed. It works on the reporter as well as it does on her children.

"Miss, in a few minutes, I can answer questions. Right now, I need you to be quiet."

Pieter groans. Grabbing her arm, he drags Yui down the hallway, leaving the beleaguered reporter. She clicks off her microphone, muttering to herself, not seeing the shadow forming underneath the light.

"Yui," Pieter says, "Let's not provoke members of the press."

"This is more important than the Press," Yui responds, "I'm trying to figure out a solution to Zyuu's problem before it affects any of the other girls. Asuka's working on it, but I haven't heard from her all day! We need to focus on our priorities!"

"Exactly what are those priorities, Dr. Ikari?"

Yui rolls her eyes, turning back to the reporter...and winces as she sees the shape behind her.

8P.

She turns, hearing the odd trill, and the reporter comes face to face with a black, white lined sphere roughly the size of a koosh ball. The ball trills again, flattening slightly as it forms an entry portal in Pieter's pocket, sucking a spare coin.

"What...the Hell are you?" the reporter asks.

The coin falls through the hole, an exit portal appearing several levels down, in the manufacturing plant of the merchandising department. Dropping, spinning, it bounces off carefully placed platforms, sliding down a ramp which leads to another portal, dropping through it and into the arms of a Sachiel remote controlled plushie. Triggered, the doll thrusts its arms out, launching the coin, sending it spinning through the air, off a rack of Sahaquiel hats, bouncing off one, two, three Sandalphon action figures, and onto a six foot tall, man sized Rock'Em, Sock'Em Evangelion. The coin lands on a switch, releasing a lock on the right arm as springs come to life...

"**i am a man!"**

And the ball flattens into a portal, just as a purple and green fist thrusts through the black plane and socks the reporter across the jaw. She spins and drops like a sack of bricks, laid out as the portal closes and Lilly returns to normal shape.

Yui and Pieter's astonishment that Lilly could talk and admonishment of her hitting someone is cut short, as the doors to the elevator open and Asuka runs out. She hops over the reporter, skidding to a stop in front of her father and mentor.

"Dr. Ikari! W-we have to find Rei!"

Shaking out of her daze, Yui's gaze turns from the floating wormhole and to Asuka.

"What? Why?"

"Because we found it," Asuka says, holding up the SDAT, "We found Dr. Akagi's files! And Rei can tell us *everything!"*

Chapter 99: Approach

In the first time

The Makers created the seeds, and sent them forth

Raining life down upon this galaxy.

Billions of years passed

And two seeds, a White Seed and Black Seed,

Came to this world. With their arrival, the Moon was created, the ever present eye looking down at night. And the seeds of life began to stir.

But pain and bloodshed followed in its wake. Life would bloom, reach its heights, and then the Progenitors would awaken to war with each other.

And reduce it all to ash.

But now is the end time.

The Progenitors have become weak, and the Progeny strong.

The stage is set and the players have taken their place.

And the cycle is now set

To end.

...

The words echo through the mass of humanity as they move, the crowd haloed by the ring of light hovering over them. Rio De Janeiro comes in the distance. The Children of Armisael, his worshippers, sing hymns as they walk, ever protected by the being they have come to worship as a god.

For the time has come.

Chapter 99:

"*Start entry sequence. Initiating LCL Ionization. Plug depth stable at 1.29."*

The lights in the entry plug flicker on, and Shinji coughs out an air bubble as he looks around to find the walls all solid metal. In the corner of his eye, a screen folds out, showing Mana, clad in her beige NERV uniform, leaning over the camera.

"*Comfy?"*

"Pretty much," he says, "I'm not actually using Uri's plug, am I?"

"*Nope. This is one of the spares. Your normal entry plug is still in the Mark-01, for just in case. We're going to be testing Uri in Go-kun after this."*

"Okay. Say, Mana? What happens if I get a better score than Uri in Zwei?"

"*I imagine he kills you, because you've managed to surpass him in yet another thing due to the universe being unfair."*

He cocks an eyebrow.

"*Kidding. We doubt that's going to happen, but we're just seeing who can pilot what. Brass says you're too good a pilot to be sidelined, so they want you piloting something."*

"Got it," he says, and sighs, hands rolling around the butterfly controls. He feels the pulling at the back of his head, a familiar sensation. Perhaps even welcomed. How messed up has his life gotten when something summed up as 'supergluing his soul to a 60 meter tall cyborg' is a *welcome* thing, he asks himself.

"*Third stage reached. Synchonization start."*

At the pronouncement from Maya, the plug walls turn transparent. The lights on the A-10 connectors glow, as his own eyes begin to outline themselves in blue.

"*Second Child Recognized. Synchronization at 68%. Evangelio Unit-02 has activated."*

"Wait," he says, "Second child? I thought I was the thir-"

"**MASTER!**"

The entry plug shakes with the delighted pronouncement. The piloting seat tilts as Zwei's head rises, four eyes glowing dimly over the Cage.

"Uh...Zwei? I'm not Asuka. I'm Shinji. We've met before-"

"**MASTER!**"

"Zwei...I'm...I'm not Asuka. Seriously. Mana, is something wrong with Zwei's programming or something?"

"**SMELLS LIKE MASTER!**"

Shinji's shoulders slump. Well, in all honesty, he did expect something like this at some point. He got shit from his mother, from Asuka's brother, and more. So, eventually, he had to get shit from her pet Evangelion.

"Okay," Shinji says, "Zwei, when a boy and a girl really like each other..."

...

"Is he giving the sex talk to *another* Evangelion?" Misato asks, shaking her head as they listen to Shinji over the speakers.

Mana nods, failing to mask the grin on her face.

"You know," she says, "If piloting doesn't work out, he's got a future as Evangelion therapist."

...

"So...that's it?"

Asuka blinks, staring at the page on the screen. That, indeed, is it.

"Seriously?" Mana asks, "That tape holds...what...180 gigs? And that was it?"

Her nails begin digging into the armrests. Her head tilts, her lip quivering.

"Seriously? Really? That whole thing was just p-"

Her denouement is interrupted by the ear-splitting scream that erupts from Asuka. Stepping back, Mana taps her fingers together as the girl screams, the metal of the arm rests bending back as Asuka's fingers dig into them despite the lack of her enhanced plugsuit.

"Better?" Mana asks.

"M-much," Asuka says, and slumps back, "Did...Did just read *seven hours* of badly written s-science porn staring my *boyfriend's father?"*

"Yep. Weird. What's the life of one of those tapes, anyway?"

Asuka shrugs.

"Because, if it's only a few years," Mana says, "How'd Akagi know someone would find it? I mean, seriously, this is important, right? So...is it on the tape? Why would it be on the tape?"

Asuka blinks, nodding. Gears in her mind start turning. Mana has a point, she muses. There has to be a different explanation, and if Akagi hid the data on this SDAT player, that doesn't necessarily mean she hid it on the SDAT Tape...

Wait.

Wait. Waitwaitwait. More connections. The SDAT player wasn't a gift from Dr. Ikari, it was a gift from Dr. Akagi. Dr. Akagi had affection for Shinji like a child, and therefor intended to trust her secret with Shinji. Meaning that the secret would be on the SDAT...

"It's in the player."

Mana blinks, opens her mouth to ask...

And then Asuak smashes the player against the desk. Seals release, modified from the normal screws and fasteners that hold the player together, splitting the casing open.

And dropping a small metal plate, half the thickness of her pinky, on the desk.

Picking it up, she holds it close, deciphering the writing etched into it.

"What is it?"

"Nonsense," Asuka says, "I...don't know what it means. But it h-has to be a code left from Dr. Akagi."

"For who?"

Asuka smirks. She's picked up that habit from Yui.

"M-my guess is that's programmed. And I think out best bet would be *Rei."*

...

"*...and so that's what we found. And also, Shinji? A lot of that was footage of your dad in the shower. Asuka may be feeling frisky. FYI."*

"Mana."

"Sorry, ma'am."

Shinji shakes his head, leaning back in his chair as the entry plug jerks into place, his second test of the day about to commence.

"*Start entry sequence,"* Mana calls out, "*Initializing LCL ionization. Plug depth stable at 1.54."*

Twitching his right index finger, a display comes up. Yep, he thinks, they put him in Unit-05 this time. It's time for him to get good and close with Rei's boyfriend. Are they dating? They have freaky mind children, but he's never really had a chance to talk to Go-kun like this. But then again, he doesn't really talk to a lot of people, which does give the impression that he's bland.

"*Synchronization requirement met. Synchronization holding at 61%."*

"Okay," Shinji says, "What's Rei's usual synch rate?"

"*Somewhere in the 200's. So she can drill at will."*

Shinji blinks. Sighing, his shoulders slump in the entry plug.

"So...I suck at this?"

"*Shinji, a synch rate of 60 percent is enough for you to effectively kick the crap out of any Angel,"* Misato says, her face appearing in his left eye, "*It's just that Rei synchs with Go-kun on a much higher level than anyone*

else. But, it's good enough that you'd be a good backup pilot for Go-kun if we couldn't find Rei."

Misato's voice is cut off. The plug glows, something from Maya about VR Interface being announced over the communication network before the world turns white. And Shinji finds himself now sitting in a living room, on a couch, in front of a wood coffee table and old style, small television with an antennae peaking out.

He looks down to find that he's wearing a tweed suit, and feels on the top of his head a cobbler hat.

Looking up, he finds, dressed exactly the same, Go-kun.

"**Hello, Shinji,**" the Evangelion says, "**I thought we should talk.**"

...

They march, under the light of their god. They are thousands strong, healthy and hale, stronger than they have ever been in their life. Chanting their prayers, walking under its light, they follow Armisael as Rio comes into view. A halo over them, angelic and majestic, and they continue their joyful song.

...

"I can understand that you don't trust us completely, considering that this facility used to be run by Lorenz Kihl. And besides which, it's never wise to trust Makinami. But still, you have to consider that I asked you to come here."

The scruffy man in the ponytail scratches the back of his head as the elevator continues its transit downward. This is only the latest part of the speech, the riot act, that has been read to him since he woke up.

"Well, in all honesty," Kaji says, "It was Dr. Ikari who asked me to come here. But I see what you're saying."

Kei turns back to him, her eyelids dropping ever so slightly. It is a near perfect imitation of Dr. Ikari when she glares, something he's been on the receiving end, and only helps to cement the idea is that Kei is very much what Yui may have been like when she was 16.

"Message received," Kaji says, "Anyway, you've got a point. No going behind the boss's back. So, what do we know?"

"From the notes I recovered, my mother was the original target," Kei responds, a small twitch in her brow upon the pronouncement, "The blast would have killed her instantly. I had my AT Field up just in time, however, which saved me."

"Right. So we just need to figure out who planted it then, right?"

"Exactly. I need to see if this is a larger conspiracy," Kei says, "And if any of the NERV-Berlin staff are in on it. Lorenz Kihl is dead. Things seem to work smoother, that way."

The door opens with a *ding,* opening to reveal the metal hallway several hundred meters below the surface. Reaching into her lab coat, Kei removes a key card, handing it to Kaji.

"This is a copy of my keycard, and the MAGI has been updated to allow you access," she says, "Report back to me around dinner time and tell me what you find."

He nods, palming the card, walking out of the elevator and bowing. The doors close, the elevator speeding up, and Kaji turns...just as a blue shape floats by, and the air turns colder, for a second. And shaking it off, he begins walking down the hall.

...

"Okay...so you need authorization form 1701-89-NX-091-B."

"'Kay."

"Then you need to make copies of it, and have them sign on page 3, 7, 11, 14, 15 and 29."

"'Kay."

"Then make copies of the signatures and scan them."

"'Kay."

The doors to the office open, and Hyuga Makoto looks up from the open filing cabinets littering Katsuragi's office just in time to see Asuka and Yui enter. They stop, finding Makoto sitting at Katsuragi's

desk, which is for some reason now clean and arranged, and chalk it up to the blue haired girl going through the filing cabinet.

"Rei?" Yui asks.

The girl looks up, folding the packet of papers and shoving it into her school uniform's jacket pocket.

"What are you doing?" Yui asks.

"Stuff."

"I see," Yui says, "Ah...Lieutenant?"

"Above my pay grade?" Makoto asks.

Yui nods.

"Right. Coffee break it is, then," he says, standing, and walks out, closing the door behind him. Yui nods to Asuka, who pulls the metal plate out of the her pocket. She walks over, holding it up, the code phrase on it in full view of the blue haired nephilim. Rei's eyes go wide, clouding over...and she shakes her head.

"Sorry," she says, "I...uh...it's something, in the back of my head, but..."

Rei shakes her head again, shrugging.

"Sorry," she says, "I don't know."

Yui nods, leaning against Misato's desk.

"Okay," she says, "We found that in Shinji's old SDAT player. We thought it was a code phrase to get...anything that Naoko left."

Rei nods.

"Okay," Yui continues, "Rei, if you remember anything, contact me at once. This is about your sister."

Rei nods again, and ascends through the ventilation duct. Pulling out Katsuragi's chair, Yui slumps down into it, slamming her fist against the desk.

"*Fuck,*" she growls, "Another dead end. I guess..."

She pinches the bridge of her nose, clenching eyes shut.

"I guess when I deprogrammed the girls, it...removed whatever that code accessed. So Naoko made it a point to screw me over either way."

...

"Ikari."

No reverb, no thunderous boom to the voice, or oddly inappropriate affection. There are three people who address him directly by his last name. One is an Angel, one is the source of life on Earth. Seeing how he neither feels himself in imminent danger- being inside the locker room and having just changed into a green and black plugsuit for this test- nor does he feel the imminent need to go forth and multiply, that leaves one last suspect.

"Uri?"

Turning from the locker, he finds, lo and behold, Uri approaching, still in his red and green plugsuit and holding his A-10 connectors in his hand.

"You're holding a synch test with Unit-07, yes?" he asks.

"Yep. Who're you testing with?"

"The Mark-01. But I don't see why, because no one's allowed to pilot it in a combat situation and-"

Shinji sucks his teeth, cringing.

"What?" Uri asks.

"Ichi has a crush on you."

"What."

Uri blinks, shakes his head and pinches the bridge of his nose. He sighs, shoulders slumping, the entire motion moving through him like a dramatic tremor. Shinji checks his feet, making sure there is no shaking of the Earth to otherwise force the motion in Uri's shoulders, and settles on him being dramatic.

"Right," Uri says, "Anyway. About Unit-07. We both know that it is based on Kirishima's subconscious, and Kirishima has...unresolved

issues involving you, and while Asuka and she have worked those out, JA-Tan has not. So, please, do not indulge any-"

"Hold it right there," Shinji interrupts, clearing his throat, "Uh...well, I have two main reasons why I would not even think about flirting with JA-Tan. First, I am desperately in love with your sister, and would never hurt her or cheat on her."

"Yes. Good. And."

"She's an *Evangelion,*" Shinji responds, rolling his eyes, "No, let me elaborate. She's a sixty meter tall cyborg, without a gender. Moreso, she used to be the OS of an eighty meter tall walking tank. What am I going to do to consummate the relationship, get a wet suit, a flashlight, and a *crane?"*

*"*You're being deliberately dense, yes?" Uri asks, "There's a virtual link. Immersive environments. Avatar bodies. She could maintain a relationship like that."

"Have you put thought into this?"

Uri blanches, shudders, and shuffles his feet.

"Uh...not in that way."

"If you touch Ichi, I will hurt you."

"Right. Right. Right...right," Uri groans, "Look, let me get my points clear. If what you say is true, the Mark-01 has a crush on me. Look...I...look, Ikari, I find relationships complicated. But I'm fairly sure I may be getting on well in that way with Annette, I already have multiple girls after me, and a twelve...ish...year old Evangelion is someone I am not interested in. I, as a peace offering, will choose to accept your warning about Ichi, and do not fear that I will go after your little sister...Evangelion..."

Shinji nods, cracking a grin.

"Yeah. Peace offering accepted. And besides which, if JA-Tan can't be professional with me, then I can't pilot her in Mana's place, can I?"

"Yes."

Uri smiles, faintly.

"Things would go a lot better around here if people were more

professional. It was more...what's the word...sane in NERV-Berlin. But let us both accept that we are looking out for these girls' interests."

Up in the vents above them, red eyes crinkle slightly in the corners. She can admire someone who can be protective like that. It is a strange feeling, this one is, Siyon Ayanami thinks; sort of warm and flushing and...unlike the cold mechanistic feelings she is all used to imposing upon her mind.

She thinks she could come to like them.

"Wait," Shinji says, "Wasn't Berlin run by an evil overlord and your mother's ex-husband?"

Uri shrugs.

"I am not saying that NERV-Berlin didn't have its flaws. But it was more sane, better organized, and the staff were more professional."

"Outside of the boss plotting to end the world and become God."

"That has nothing to do with the staff present...and..."

Uri tilts his head, an expression one would be more likely to find on a dog. Or Zwei.

"Ending the world? Becoming a god?"

"You know, Nagisa's father...clone source...whatever," Shinji says, and scratches the back of his head, "Him. He was the one who put the cherub in Unit-03 and turned everyone against Kei. That guy."

"He was planning to end the world."

"And become God," Shinji continues, "That's what Mom explained to me. He was going to end the world, destroy humanity, and become God."

Uri blinks.

"Right. Okay."

He blinks again, as if trying to process that.

"Well. The intent to which professionalism is put is not linked to the actual act of being professional."

Shinji nods.

"Yeah."

"I think that covers a lot," Uri continues, "A lot of things. Professionalism is a means, not an end. NERV-Berlin, the Second Branch, was very professional."

"And now it's being run by Kei and her boyfriend."

"What."

"Rei filled me in on the details," Shinji says, tapping the wrist interface of his plugsuit and calling up a hologram of a tier chart, "Kei's pretty much the assistant to my grandfather, who's right now basically our parents' boss, and she sort of runs the science wing in Berlin. And Kaworu is more or less in charge of the Evas. What's he like?"

"Tolerable," Uri says with a shrug, "Nice enough, thought perhaps more awkward than I am. He means well. But like I said, professionalism is the means, not the end. It's a means which reduces the ridiculous emotional drama that seems to happen around here. And hopefully would stop the perceived nepotism that happens, which I realize I just mentioned despite my mother being the primary reason I am an Eva pilot."

"I think you then say, 'I said that out loud, didn't I?'"

"Yes. Yes." Uri sighs once again. It may be a respiratory problem. "Anyway, Annette and Mari both say that Kaworu and Kei are adorable together, althought Annette fingerquotes when she says that."

"She could hold a torch for him."

"That's disgusting," Uri says, blanching, "Annette's like a sister to him. Not every family is like yours."

"Hey!" Shinji says, folding his arms, "I'll have you know only one of my sisters wants to commit incest. Or two. Because Rei put it really weird what she did when Leliel dumped us in those other words. Or three, but Asuka has to be involved for Kei to get turned on."

Uri blinks, shakes his head, and palms his face.

"Right. Right. First, I did not need to know that. Second; I really didn't

need to know that one of your sisters, the one now seriously involved with my brother, only wanted to sleep with you if she can get my sister involved."

"She could get interested in you, since you're a sort of Sohryu/Nagisa blend."

"Shut up, Ikari."

Somewhere above, Siyon smiles ever so slightly wider.

...

NERV coffee cups are reinforced, taking into account the eccentricities of the lead scientists, so when the latest attempt to get the code phrase working failed, miserably, Yui pitched her empty cup across her office. It bounced off the bullet rated glass covering the Unit-01 schematics on the wall, and is currently resting on its side at the foot of her desk.

"So," Yui says, "That's Kiko, Nana, Hatchi, Iti, and Kei who have no reaction to the code. To review, we've gotten them on video, had them read the code, and while it seems to have some sort of connection, it doesn't actually access anything, as my deprogramming them seems to have removed that."

She groans, running a hand through her hair, her other hand tapping on her desk as Asuka paces.

"We can find Siyon, next," Yui says, "I had the most trouble deprogramming her. We'll have to get a Section 2 detail, just in case, because we don't want to trigger anything Naoko left..."

"What about Zyuu?" Asuka asks.

"I checked," Yui sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, glasses on the table, "No programming. Outside of memories and eccentricities, Zyuu's completely human, if miserable."

"A-and Mana wants to take a crowbar to the MAGI," Asuka continues, "Though I think it's to see if there's any more porn stored on the mainframe."

"There has to be something," Yui says, tapping her fingers together in

front of her face, nostril twitching as she thinks, "Something. Ideas?"

"Unleash the Reego on Naok00. See what she says. See if she cracks."

Yui cocks an eyebrow.

"Asuka?"

"I just had to read all that *porn.* I'm not feeling sympathetic."

Well, she isn't stuttering, Yui muses. Which means she's focused. And pissed.

"There has to be something," Yui repeats, "Some way. She wouldn't leave a code phrase and only leave it in the hands of the Ree, especially if they weren't meant to survive past killing me."

Asuka sighs, nods, and looks at the plate. Pulling it up close, she stares at the writing, tilting her head.

"What does it m-mean?"

"Naoko was a bit of a nerd. May have been from a show she watched. Why?"

"It's...nonsensical. Does this mean anything?" She clears her throat, holding the plate up.

"Bingle Bangle Dingle Dangle Yikkety Do Yikkety Da, Ping Pong Lippy Tappy Too Ta, Poopy Pa Pippy Pay, Bib Bab Bip Bap Bibbim Boobim Ba Ba Bang."

The ceiling tiled part, and on its waldo, the mock up of Unit-00's head descends.

"*Passcode accepted,"* Naok00 states, "*Now accessing the Akagi Files."*

...

"*Second stage reached. Initiating LCL ionization and setting plug depth to 1.08. How are you feeling, Shinji?"*

"Pretty good," he responds, leaning back in the seat, "Say, is there a reason I have a different plugsuit for this test?"

"*Unit-07's systems are based on Jet Alone Prime's old operating system,*" Maya responds, "*Mana has a special plugsuit for interface, so we rigged up a similar one for you.*"

He nods, tapping the butterfly controls as the plug walls turn opaque. At least they didn't give him Mana's actual plugsuit. He's pretty sure she'd have a special hell planned for him if they did.

"Where is Mana, anyway?"

The screen unfolds in his right eye, revealing Misato.

"*Mana's helping with Uri's synch test in Go-kun. What did Go-kun do to you?*"

"He wanted to bond," Shinji explains, "We talked, arm wrestled, then he took me to his idea of a strip club."

"*...Should I not tell Asuka about that?*"

"His idea," Shinji responds, "It was an auto body shop. I don't think I can look at cars anymore without feeling dirty."

"*Synchronization start,*" Maya interrupts, "*And... VR interface is activating!*"

Shinji rolls his eyes as the world blurs, cascading into a series of light and sounds and forming into a Gazebo. Looking down, he finds himself in a black suit and top hat, sitting in front of a table with a cup of tea in front of him.

"Hello."

Sitting across from him is the girl. Red hair falling down her back, dressed in a long dress, buttoned blouse and long waistcoat, hands folded on the table in front of her and smile on her face.

"Okay," Shinji says, "Let's lay some ground rules, okay? You're a nice girl, you're sort of Mana's subconscious, and since Mana can't pilot NERV wants me to pilot instead. But let's lay some ground rules, okay?"

JA-Tan nods.

"First, I'm not going to flirt with you," he says, "I'm dating Asuka, I'm happy with Asuka, and I'm not going to cheat on her. Seriously."

JA-Tan nods, sighing.

"Fine," she says, "I...understand. Seriously, I do."

"I will be your friend," he says, "And I have no problem being your pilot. I'll also help you with whatever you want, but...well, like I said, no flirting. Okay?"

"I...appreciate the honesty," JA-Tan says, and takes a deep breath, "Truth be told, I think that's a good idea. Well, since the whole thing with Go-kun's children, I'm pretty sure I don't want a boyfriend, either. Even if I transfer to an Avatar body like your sister did."

"Even Uri?"

"Especially Uri," JA-Tan says, and shrugs, "Honestly, I don't see what Mana sees in him. But anycase, you're honest about this. I mean, I *do* think you're nice, but not everyone who has the mindset of a 16 year old has to be looking for someone to pair up with, do they?"

He nods, smiling. Well, he thinks. That's someone here that is actually sensible about this.

"I think we're going to get along just fine, then," he says, "So...um...what next-"

A rumble. A tremor underneath him.

"What was that?"

"What was what?" JA-Tan asks.

"I...felt something. Like a shaking or..."

The world turns black. The haze clearing, the Entry Plug walls turn transparent, Misato and Maya appearing in his right eye view.

"What happened?"

"*We pulled you out because we're getting weird readings all over the place. We think it might be an Angel. Your synch ratio, though is holding at...what was it, Maya?"*

"83 percent."

"So congrats, Shinji, you're Unit-07's new pilot. Now stand by while we figure out what's happening."

...

Armisael hovers, miles outside the city limits. The followers, the children of Armisael, chant and sing, hands held as they sway too and fro underneath their source of life and bounty. Droplets rain down from the halo, nourishing them, blowing into the city itself and gifting the people within as well.

Which is just the provocation needed.

Miles to east, it senses it. Under a cracked patch of land that was once rich and green, a pulse cracks the earth, erupting like an awakened volcano. Fire and lightning fill the air, the roar of an unleashed, unchained beast rising to fill the air.

It is time, Armisael intones, **And though I regret that which is about to transpire...I greet you, Nathanael.**

...

Deep beneath the city layers of Tokyo-3, it stirs. It has won, taking this form. That which would have been Rogziel has been subsumed. The Punishment of God is no more. The Cherubim abomination that would have razed the city has been assimilated by the remnant.

It waits. It assumes its form, uncurling through the larval stage as it takes shape, the molten fire of its S2 organ pumping through its veins. The cracked core that was nearly destroyed by the lilithian angel fully encompasses that which would have been the cherubim of torture. The awareness, limited, begins to unfurl. But it is still limited. It is still directionless.

And the limited mind reaches out to its source. A connection is made.

Deep beneath Tokyo-3, the newborn Angel calls out to its creator, to its source.

...

And deep beneath NERV-Berlin, levels below a lab that Kaji Ryojo surveys, far below the file cabinets his goes through in his search for

the truth, there is a laboratory, empty and known only to a handful of people.

Inside the laboratory, inside a glass case, a single red fragment feels the connection and listens to the cries of its newly aware spawn. And seizing the connection, unaware, the red fragment glows, a spherical crimson sun inside the container.

And the mountain speaks in thunder.

"**I AM ASSUMING DIRECT CONTROL.**"

Chapter 100: Fated Duel

A beat.

The white tendril shoots out of the ground, tearing open an armor layer as concrete and cars go flying. Two white wings emerge from the center of Tokyo-3, two thick logs on hinges following suit.

The ends of the limbs bend forward, sharpening at the edges and slamming into the two buildings flanking it, people running, screaming as an alabaster shape rises, the endless white only broken by the red sphere embedded at the top of its skull.

Rising, it uncoils itself. A serpent hundreds of meters long, held aloft by two massive wings. Four limbs unfurl, two ending in blades, two ending in openings that pulse and hum. Its angular, shark like face bends forward, parting and revealing rows upon rows of teeth, recessed eyes sharpening as they take in light for the first time.

And seeing the scurrying insects before him, the newly awakened Angel roars-

---

...

Through License of that which is named "I Am," I have come.

Though I shall rend the Base Earth beneath me, I have come.

I am the son of Might,

Weapon of the White Seed.

Through the destruction of the Abomination and the Will of the Messengers I am born.

You will tremble before me,

And pray for Mercy,

But find I have none to give.

I am the Wrath of God,

Angel of Righteousness.

I am Zadkiel.

And by will of my Father,

I have come.

Chapter 100:

Fated Duel

Uncoiling its tail, the white skinned creature rises. At the heart of Tokyo-3, traffic stops and people scream, the very obvious Angel having appeared in their midst. In stretches out its white, feathered wings, the curve of its tooth lined jaw giving the impression of a knowing, patient smile.

This works in contrast to the pandemonium in NERV-1. Alarms blare, klaxons screaming to attend battle stations. In Central Dogma, Misato runs in as the Commander's station rises to its overseeing point.

"Someone explain to me what the Hell happened and how an Angel *snuck up on us."*

"MAGI theorizes that it was a Cherubim larva left when ADAM attacked," Maya reports, multiple screens popping up, each showing the creature from a different angle, "Pattern Blue is not registering as a Cherubim, though..."

The holographic projectors on the bridge hum to life, forming into a three dimensional image of the floating flatfish.

"Junior, what're we dealing with?" Misato demands.

"**He is called Zadkiel. Beyond that, I do not know. I sense him as like myself, but I have no memory of a being like him existing before. He is entirely new to me, as he is to you.**"

"Still no motion from the Angel," Hyuga reports, "Evacuation procedures are underway."

"**I can sense that. It wishes you to evacuate. It wants the city empty before it will strike, as it desires battle.**"

On the screen, one of the arms, an arm ending in a bulbous, hollow structure. It doesn't take them long to realize what it is, before the end

of it fills with light and fires out into a beam. An office building vaporizes, the expanding pillar of plasma and light rising into a cross shaped structure.

"Tell me that was empty," Misato says.

"Maintenance staff only," Maya says, tearing her eyes from the screen as numbers begin coming up, "Angel is moving. Present course projected..."

A three dimensional map of the city appears, a line from the Angel to the destination appearing.

"Oh, shit," Misato growls, "It's heading straight for the mall. Prep the Evas! Someone get Rei to Go-kun and-"

...

Alarm klaxons blare, Shinji tapping on the holographic keyboard as the plates above Unit-07 open, a path projected in his right eye.

"*Shinji,*" JA-Tan says, "*I have the path, and I've used your backdoor into the MAGI to electrify the rails. Is this really wise?"*

"No," he says, "But we're the only Eva prepped and it's heading for the densest area in the city. Misato!"

Misato appears in his left eye, Maya in the background calling out projected casualty figures.

"Unit-07 is prepped and I'm using my old Balthasar connection to set myself up for launch. I'm going to intercept the Angel before it can attack the city center!"

Misato blinks, turns back to Maya, listens to something, and turns back to Shinji.

"*That's incredibly stupid and dangerous. Good luck! We're getting Uri back into Zwei and prepping the rest of the Evas. Give him Hell."*

The connection cuts, Shinji tapping in more commands. The rails begin to glow as the launch mechanism overclocks. And gripping the controls, he flashes a brief grin.

"Eva Launch!" he yells.

...

In the Tokyo-3 City Center, the location of many of the malls, shops, community centers and places of gathering, thousands of civilians panic. It is not just that they live their day to day lives in Tokyo-3, the main front of the Angel War. It is not just that the Angel, which appeared at the heard of the city, vaporized an entire building for no reason at all. It is that the Angel, from their view, is getting bigger and bigger. It is heading *right towards them.*

Buildings have already begun retracting as they flow towards shelters, screams and panic filling the air. Mayumi holds onto her cat tight, Zophie looking over her shoulder as she stares at the approaching white shape.

This is bad, the former Cherubim thinks. She can sense the presence at the heart of the Angel. She knows it. She knows what's coming. She darts from Mayumi's arms, running, the girl hot on her heels as the cat runs towards the nearest evacuation shelter. It is only as Mayumi catches up to her outside the metal doors that Zophie stops, sitting on her haunches as the glasses wearing girl scoops her up. And looking around, seeing her assigned shelter in front of her, she darts inside.

Alarms blare, the plates retracting behind the approaching Angel, as the mouth of Zadkiel opens to reveal row upon row of jagged, bloody teeth, leveling its eyes upon the fleeing Lilim.

Which is when a blur launches from the entry point, flying through the air before dropping knee first on Zadkiel. The tremor shakes the building, some momentarily stopping their run to safety to see Unit-07 bring its fist down on the Angel's face, sending teeth flying.

"Don't let up!" Shinji yells, "It's Core's on top of its head!"

Unit-07's left hand comes up, progressive knife extending from her wrist, and brings it down on the head. Layers of AT Fields fold out, winding outwards as it pulses against the vibrating blade.

And then the fields move, appearing between Zadkiel and the Eva, tightly compressing as the Angel grins. They pulse, expand, and explode outward, tossing the Eva through the air as the Angel rises, forgetting the city center buildings as they retract into the ground. A pulse of its light, and the Angel flies, pursuing the Eva as it lands in a crouch in an empty portion of the city.

Shinji groans, rubbing his chest, shaking his head as he sees the Angel descending. And then he hears it. A voice, at the back of head, speaking with thunder from the mind of the Angel to him.

"**IKARI.**"

...

The creature rises, a single red sphere wrapped in fire. The fire burns but gives off no heat, wrapped in the envelope of magnetic and AT Fields. Like an uncoiling serpent, it rises, shining like a second sun over Rio Di Janeiro, extending into a shape reminiscent of a red and gold snake.

The roar is not from a mouth, but from the heated, accelerated air whipping past it, thousands of miniature sonic booms marking its rise. Hovering over its worshippers, Armisael remains placid, steady, as the new angelic monster turns its attention towards it.

"Second Blue Pattern has shown up outside Rio," Aoba reports, "MAGI designation: Nathanael!"

The screen opens up, showing the shape of fire and sound, rising near the city, turning to the shape of Armisael.

"What the Hell is that," Misato asks.

Next to her, clad in a green and gold plugsuit, wide smile parting her face, Nana points at the Cherubim.

"BOOM GOD!"

...

The bladed arms come down first, digging into the shoulder fins as the Angel pins Unit-07 against the ammo building. The tail comes up next, wrapping around the Eva's throat, Shinji feeling his windpipe constricting as the empty eyes of Zadkiel stare directly at him.

"**IKARI,**" it booms, "**YOU HAVE DISAPPOINTED ME.**"

The tail constricts tighter. Shinji struggles to breathe.

"**EVEN IN A DIFFERENT CHARIOT, YOU ARE THE ONE WHO BESTED THE FATHER. I DESIRE A CHALLENGE, NOT A CHILD.**"

The face of Zadkiel tilts. The smile on it grows wider.

"**YES...YES! YOUR STRENGTH IS IN YOUR CONNECTIONS TO OTHER LILIM. PERHAPS, IF THEY WERE THREATENED, YOU WOULD BE A WORTHY OPPONENT.**"

Zadkiel turns, eyeing the open launch chute...and Unit-07's right hand snaps out. Armor plates move, surrounding the hand as it retracts into the wrist, focus screens and rail connectors attaching, a turbine spinning to speed as the new barrel begins to glow.

And Unit-07, unbidden by its pilot, jams it against the back of Zadkiel's head just as the buckshot of rail accelerated rounds slams into the Angel ands ends it flying forward.

"What the Hell-" Shinji starts, as the plug glows blue and the Eva rises.

"*Biolink Established. M.E.G.A.S., Online. Weaponsystem fullunlock authorized by onboard AI.*"

The lining of Shinji's plugsuit begins to glow. On the armor, plated begin to flow, unlocking, rearranging. A second barrel assembles over the left hand, missile batteries unlocking on the shoulder fins. Rail cannons on the underarm carriages reveal themselves, vernier thrusters unfolding over the back. Armor summoned from the Dirac Armory assembles, forming a bulkier, rounder Evangelion, rising taller, broader, the collar armor enclosing around the Eva's head as the gunmetal, gold, and green Eva stands across the distance from the Angel.

In Central Dogma, Mana chuckles, cracking her knuckles.

"Fuck *yes,*" she says, "Give'em Hell, girl."

...

"MAGI 28: **Durandal**, online."

"MAGI 29: **Curtana,** online."

"MAGI 30: **Merchant,** online."

Three red spheres, formed into an inverted triangle, hand in the darkness, illumination shining down as the twelve monoliths appear around them.

"**Consensus achieved,**" Durandal states, its voice booming, deep and bass in the darkness, "**The new Angel is a high level threat. Waveforms given off by its AT Field suggest higher magnitude of power than standard Angelic life forms. Requesting permission to activate and deploy Evangelion Mark-09.**"

The monoliths are silent, debate held in a channel other than the AIs taking place.

"*Permission granted,*" SEELE-05 states, "*Deploy the Mark-09.*"

...

"*Synchronization requirements met. Unit-05 is activating.*"

The plug interior lights up, and with a sigh, Rei opens her eyes. She has a lot on her mind- thankfully, this does little to impact her synchronization ratio. Kei once explained to her how she synchs with the 04a, cheating the system by choosing an AI much like herself. Considering that Go-kun's personality was born from her temporarily merging with Unit-05 during its initial rampage, Rei can't help but wonder if the same is true for her.

"*...ay can you hear me? I've reestablished communications and this is really important.*"

Shinji appears in her right eye. His neck is red, he's sweating in the LCL.

"*We've got a problem! The Angel is being controlled by another Angel. It's being controlled by Zeruel!*"

The problems of the last few days fall away. Rei smiles, grinning, teeth bared as the situation explains itself to her.

"**Let me get that straight,**" Go-kun booms, "**It's the same Angel that attacked us after New Vegas?**"

"Yep," Rei says, "Same one you've been beating yourself up over losing to."

"**Mainly because I was unable to make an AT Field. Which won't be the case, this time.**"

"Ah yep."

"*I like where this is going,*" Misato says, "*Launch Unit-05!*"

...

The snake of flame strikes, darting forward at Armisael as the halo lowers, a dome of orange light surrounding his worshippers and deflecting the explosion that ensues from the contact. The bow wave radiates outward, windows on the outskirts of the city shattering.

So be it, Armisael intones. The ring begins to unwind, the dome around the humans turning a milky, transparent white, and a line of light shoots out towards the Cherubim. The two AT Fields-manifest as the sheer force of the impact-class against each other. Buildings begin tilting, shifting away from the battle. To the outside observer, it would be because the buildings are afraid.

To a seismologist, it is because the very earth beneath the two clashing angelic creatures is being pushed apart.

Inside the protective dome, the chosen of Armisael pray and cheer to their champion and savior. Inside the city itself, they can only watch in horror, a dividing wall of orange light appearing between them, splitting the ground.

Nathanael rises, the serpentine form shifting, expanding outwards. Less dense, more diffuse, it begins spreading across the sky above the city. The sky turns black, then red, an apocalyptic thundercloud covering the sky above the city. Armisael can feel it, the rage of the Cherubim before it. The rage the Cherubim feels directed at him, and at the Lilim below. It takes but a thought, but a decision, but Armisael can hear the Lilim in the city as many begin screaming, crying...and praying. Praying for aid. Praying for salvation.

If it is salvation you ask for, I do not know if I can provide it.

The dome begins expanding, Armisael forming a ring once more. Rising, beneath him another dome appears. Diffuse and milky white, formed from the light of his soul, it expands and covers the entire city.

But I will attempt so. I am Armisael. Mountain of the Judgement of God. And the Lilim are under my protection.

...

Sitting at the desk deep below the surface of the Second Branch, Kaji taps the pen against the folders, running a hand through his hair as he scans over the lines of text and data on the laptop, connected to the network via the backdoor of his own design. The attachment- something he's duplicated and will pass onto Misato and others at the first opportunity- is the small card jammed into the USB port of his computer, acting as a back door into any MAGI system and based on code Ritz wrote for him.

Useful. Very useful.

So far, nothing damning on Kihl, outside of him being Kihl. Leaning back, stretching his arms above his head with an audible pop, Kaji pushes back the chair and stands. He walks around the office, Ayanami's office in fact, staring at the bookshelf on the far wall. He scans over the shelves, filled with textbooks and ring binders.

And academic's office, even if Kei's too young for college. Well, maybe not. She is a genius, and Sohryu's daughter already has her bachelors, so he wouldn't be surprised of Ayanami did an online degree while in the MAGI.

"Let's see," he says, "If I was an evil genius, I would use this bookshelf as a secret door to my secret lab. And I'd make sure one of these stands out..."

He scans over the books, something standing out. Aha, Kaji thinks. My Little Pony DVDs. No self-respecting mad scientist would have that for anything other than a switch marker.

He pulls out the DVD box set, waiting for the wall to slide out. Nothing happens. Cocking an eyebrow, he looks at the DVDs, flipping over the back. Well, he muses, he guess that makes sense. She is a Ree, after all.

Placing it back, he scans over the books. Academic textbooks, Digital Rights Management instruction manuals, hard science fiction, old fiction and history books and...

"Huh," he says, "'Historia von D. Johann Fausten.' *Faust,* right?"

He pulls at the book. The book does not budge, instead causing the wall to shift, move back, and slide to the left, revealing a platform surrounding by glowing LCD lights.

"Okay," Kaji says, "This looks promising."

And he steps onto the lift, which speeds downwards.

...

The pump mechanism on the underside of Unit-07's forearms moves, shifting air out the sides in a plume of condensing water vapor before blasting out a focused cloud of soda can sized projectiles. The bounce off the white serpent's AT Field, as it divides, gathers at the extended cannon arms of the Angel, and lances out into two beams of pink and crimson light.

Two AT Fields flare around Unit-07, deflecting the blasts upwards before the Eva charges, leaping over another blast before the air pumps come to life again, the Eva dropping arms forward at Zadkiel and pelting his defensive shield with hypersonic needles of metal.

All deflect, dropping to the ground as a bladed arm comes up, grinding against Unit-07's arm as she brings it up, sparks flying as Zadkiel brings the Eva down to one knee and bringing back the other arm.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Shinji yells, Unit-07 dodging, locking one of Zadkiel's bladed arms against her side before pushing one of the cannon arms skyward, "Misato! Tell me backups coming!"

The ground shakes, not with an impact but a release. Apparently, Shinji isn't the only one to overclock the launch catapults today. Something blocks the sun, and looking up, through the ceiling of the entry plug as Unit-07 turns a pair of optic sensors skyward, he can see what it is.

"Oh...shit."

"*I understand that Zeruel was the only Angel he's lost a fight to. I presume he wants a rematch?"*

"That'd be right, JA-Tan."

"*Ah, excellent. Run away!"*

Unit-07 kicks back, rolling and leaping back as the Angel turns skyward. The drill releases and folds back along Go-kun's right arm, the spindly fingers of his right arm hovering over the thick fingers of his left arm, as the energy from the S2 engine begins sparking between the palms.

All in time to the voice, booming, a mixture of Go-kun and Rei.

"**Round 2.**"

With a roar, the Evangelion thrusts his hands into an open clamshell position, the harnessed and channeled energy released as a massive wave of flame and force, all directed at Zadkiel.

Who simply grins.

...

The solid light structure forms around Asuka's hand, her authorization passcode undoing the locks around the Cage and opening the doorway. Her plugsuit is powered up, the passive holograms of her collar's mobile CinC hovering around her face. Should push come to shove, should the battle go sour, she convinced Misato to let her risk things, take matters into her own hand.

And now, Asuka stands in front of the frost covered form of the Evangelion Mark-01.

And finds that she isn't alone.

...

"Stage 2 defenses online," Aoba reports, "PROBEs 1-3 have been deployed on the Geofront Surface. Ivy, Tres, and Una have taken positions inside them. Stage 3 defenses deployed, and turret control is now given to the MAGI."

Along the walls lining the corridors of NERV, and the artificial cliffsides lining the Geofront, panels open and reveal mounted gatling

guns, red eyes blinking open along them, providing sight and laser assisted aiming. And then the cheerful, child-like voices begin speaking.

"*Okay,"* one says, "*So this is the first time we've seen Uncle Shinji deployed when he isn't with Aunt Ichi, and Aunt Ichi might be deployed without Uncle Shinji. Do you know what that means?"*

"*Empirical Data in their comparative effectiveness!"*

The other Keiwaru controlling the other turrets cheer. After all, this means they can study numerical possibilities and observant data on who, in fact, is better- their Uncle Shinji or their Aunt Ichi.

"*I still think Aunt Ichi's better,"* a distinctively girlish voice says, "*You'll see."*

"*You're just saying that 'cause you're a girl,"* a boyish sounding turret responds.

"*Nuh uh! She could beat him in a fair fight."*

"*That's 'cause she's an Evangelion, silly."*

"*Nuh uh! That's cause she's cooler and awesome and doesn't scream when we sneak up on her."*

Another turret dips its gun down, catching the attention of the others.

"*Well, I like Uncle Shinji, too, and I'm a girl,"* it says, "*I think he's really brave 'cause he does the same things Aunt Ichi does, and he's not an Eva."*

The other girl-controlled turrets turn to her.

"***HERESY.***"

...

The AT Field flares, wrapping around the blast of plasma, excited particles, and sheer kinetic force launched from Go-kun's hands, before streamlining it and reflecting it off into the sky. The blade arms extend, thrusting through the air as spears, deflecting off the globe of orange light that surrounds the quadrupedal Evangelion as he lands, throwing a cloud of dirt, pulverized soil and cement into the air around him.

A roar, and Go-kun charges, galloping through the AT Field Zadkiel throws up, shredding it like wet tissue and grabbing the Angel in a one armed bear hug before driving them both into a nearby mountain.

Bringing back the left hand, the armor shifts, twitches and Go-kun brings a hook punch across the Angel's face. The orange light washes over the smooth white skin, no damage visible, the tail winding around Go-kuns fist and yanking it back at the blade arms come up, stabbing into the armor.

Shoulder fins open up, blasting the Angel in the face with rounds of superheated gas, Rei's eyes glowing in the Entry Plug as she neutralizes Zadkiel's AT Field just in time for the blasts to sizzle against the Angel's skin. Releasing Go-kun's arm, the Angel shrieks, flying up, out of Go-kun's grip before darting towards the city itself. A new hole opens, just underneath the jaw, before firing off a series of pellets towards the city, just as Unit-02 rises to the surface and grabs Zadkiel's tail.

...

The walls shake. The armored shelters are mainly accessed from larger buildings in Tokyo-3. For safety, the shelters are fed into by lift elevators, which run along the armored plated surrounding the Geofront, until they end in the Geofront itself. The rationale was that this provides maximum safety, putting the armor beneath Tokyo-3 and the Geofront itself between them and the Angels, when they attack.

"So, I'm sure we'll me fine," Yurika Horaki says, sitting on the mat with her three daughters, Kuba, Hikari's pet Israfim, idly playing with the paddle ball as the walls shake again, "I saw what the evacuation plans look like. We're in the safest part of the city."

"Then why're the walls shaking?" Nozomi asks, hugging her bookbag to her chest, "It never shaked before."

"It did right after I got back from America," Hikari responds, placing a hand on her little sister's shoulder, "But that's because the Angel got into the Geofront. Still, it never came close to us."

Kodama is silent, sitting cross legged next to their mother, but the worry still evidence from the wrinkling of her brow. Which is when the walls shake again. And again.

And a white blade works its way between the plates of the wall, prying it apart. People scream, justified for once in their screaming, as the hole opens in the wall, in their shelter. The walls continue shaking, more blades in the far wall parting the plates, until the first hole opens wide enough to accommodate the shark like head, narrow black eyes darting from side to side as the animal intelligence directing the Zadkielim registers the Lilim as a food source.

And then, the Zadkielim's eyes glow steady, deep red, and a voice speaks that is not its own.

"**I WILL DIRECT THIS PERSONALLY.**"

...

The doors open, deep beneath Berlin. The first thing he sees is the white light, flooding the lift, temporarily blinding him as he blinks. Sight returns, speckled with colors all over the rainbow, and Kaji finds himself standing in a very new, very white and sterile room.

"Okay," he says, "This wasn't in the blueprints."

The room is white, polished metal and polymer. The air is cleaner, smells of antiseptic and germ killer, while the hairs on the back of his neck stand from the static charge that permeates everything around him. Screens line the wall, covered in code that holds no meaning to him. Looking up, he sees the red sphere above him, recognizing it from his time in NERV-1 as a MAGI computer.

"Okay," he says, "So what is this place?"

"*This place, Agent Kaji, is a trap.*"

The screens flicker. The walls begin to move.

"*I have no idea if you were really responsible for my demise. This is more a safe bet, really. If if you didn't kill me, I've wanted to kill you for a while. And if I'm dead, I have no reason not to.*"

"Spencer," Kaji whispers.

"*Excellent. This is a responsive program. Excellent virtual intelligence systems I've piggy backed onto this. Especially since NERV-2 insisted on taking a look at my cyborgs for their strike team research. Which, of*

course, were programmed by me for this eventuality."

The walls open. Clad in black, shifting armor plates, the cyborgs, NHIS's top of the line product, lurch out. And Kaji takes the cue, turning to the lift door, just as it seals and shuts, and runs across the room to the far door.

...

Nathanael rages, raining down fire like an apocalyptic thunderstorm, spreading out to cover the sky above the city and the outskirts. All that stands between it and and the lilim below is a ring of light.

He is Armisael. Amongst the eldest of the Angels, second in power only to his brother Zeruel. He awakened less than a month ago, finding himself in a world of death. Somehow, the embryo of this incarnation ended up in the middle of the Amazon dessert, ravaged by the effects of war, greed, and Father's own rage.

It found a world almost devoid of life. It found children, starving. It found adults, ravenous with hunger, grief, and loss. And though its purpose was to merge with Father, and wipe the Lilim from the world, it found, with the absence of the Father, a new purpose. The original purpose, he and his siblings were made for.

And he began to heal the land, and the people below.

In time, he has found he cares for them. In time, he has found a purpose. They are his worshippers. They are his flock.

And the Cherubim will *not* harm them.

A half world away, a glimmer of awareness comes to the miniature Giant of Light, deep below NERV-Berlin. For a brief moment, its mind connects with Armisael. The First of them sends a silent thought his way.

And salvation comes from on high. Past the apocalyptic thunderstorm, past the waging fires and lightning strikes, a high altitude jet, shaped like a single flying wing, comes over Rio. The pilot makes the sign of a cross, praying for forgiveness for what he has to do.

I forgive you, Armisael intones. And the bay doors open, releasing the payload. The small object, fins guiding it downward, spins several

times as it whistles through the air.

And the sky turns white, as if struck by flint, as the nuclear weapon detonates over Rio.

...

Drawing the progressive lance, Zwei strikes, extending the AT Field as he rises underneath Zadkiel and stabs it upward, through the torso of the Angel and coming out the other side. Blue blood paints the ground below, the dragon wyrm struggling, before smiling and stabbing a blade arm into Zwei's shoulder.

Inside the plug, Uri screams, bubbles rising from the shoulder of his armor as he grits his teeth from the paint.

A blast of light, and one of Go-kun's plasma cannons severs the blade arm, just as the large left fist strikes Zadkiel in the face, grabbing the jaw as the back end of the arm glows and releases a bolt of raw force into the Angel's head. Teeth go flying, a progressive knife courtesy of Unit-07 severing a wing from the angel, Zwei and Unit-07 extending their AT Fields to pin the Angel in place as Go-kun brings his right arm back, the drill powering to speed.

"Finish him off!" Rei yells, "Go-kun! All yours!"

The centaur eva's eyes glow, the white light of the Dirac shift replacing the drill with the larger one. His AT Field wraps around the helixical shaft, forming a drill nearly the size of Go-kun himself. Thrusting it forward, the AT Field shreds, layer upon layer yielding to the weapon, driving towards the Core on Zadkiel's head...

And stopping, just as Zadkiel brings up both cannon arms to either side of the drill and fires. Metal and wire and AT Field shred, Go-kun yelling out as his entire right arm shreds from the impact, the AT drill exploding. A flash of white replaces the weapon with his original arm, just as Zadkiel turns to Zwei and extends an arm.

Layer upon layer of AT Field compresses in front of the Angel, Uri brings up Zwei's own field just as they decompress like a spring and it sends Zwei flying.

...

Yui winces in Central Dogma, watching the battle. They honestly thought they had it- they thought the Angel was done for. But it's obviously more powerful than they anticipated.

Another screen folds out in Dogma, next to the Big Screen. A screen with the letters 05 on it, which fades from static into the familiar face of Kozou Fuyutsuki.

"*Yui,"* he says, "*We've been monitoring the battle. Help is on the way."*

"Kozou, what do you mean?" she asks.

"*The Mark-09 is about to be launched."*

...

In Cage 3, lights play over the purple and green armor. Inside the entry plug, a pair of hands grip the controls, A-10 connectors fizzling on. The plug is a two seater- Asuka is seated behind her, already beginning to synch with the Core. With the consciousness that just returned, because they may need the help.

"*Hey.*"

She closes her eyes, seeing Ichi standing before her, tilting her head as she paints a look of confusion on her face.

"*So...what? What're you doing here?"*

"I...I'm useless, out there."

"Uh huh. No. No, you're not. You're smarter than, like, 90% of NERV. I mean, yeah, what happened to you sucked, but it's not like you can't do anything."

"Doesn't matter. I...I think I can do this. I want to help. But...I want to help this way. I've been...thinking...and this makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, you synch for Shinji. So you'd synch for me, because I'm genetically similar, now."

"*Wow. That's a stretch. You really think that's the only reason I'd synch with you? 'Cause there's no way I'd synch with you otherwise, right?"*

Ichi smirks, leaning down, eye to eye with her.

"*Tell me, honestly. Why are you doing this? Honestly."*

Her teeth grind, her pulse quickens. The darkness plays over her face, and she turns to Ichi, nodding.

"I'm doing this because I want to help them," she says, "They've saved me, over and over again. I want to be able to save them."

Ichi grins.

"*Awesome.*"

The plug lights up. The A-10 connectors on the top of her head flicker on, the whirring of the plug systems in time with the beat of the Core.

"*Eighth Child Recognized."*

Zyuu's eyes begin to glow blue.

"*Dual Synchronization achieved at 164%. Evangelion, Mark-01."*

The two eyes of the Eva flash, and glow blue.

"**Rise.**"

...

In the shelter, they scream. The Zadkielim pry the holes open, tossing aside plate of armor and armed defender alike. Eyes glowing, the Prime Zadkielim, host of the consciousness of the Father of Zadkiel, floats past the defenders and levels its gaze at the family in the corner, daintly floating towards them.

"**You are familiar. You are familiar to Ikari.**"

The mouth does not move, the voice reverberates all the same. Kuba, the Israfim, jumps out in front, holding up arms and pelting the Zadkielim with energy blasts. A swipe of the tail, and the Israfim is sent flying. Yurika stands in front of her daughters, Kodama covering Nozomi's eyes, as the Zadkielim parts its mouth in a wide, predatory grin...

And then the wall next to him explodes outwards, and the Zadkielim is given but a split second to register as Junior's fist drives into his face.

Chapter 101: The Psychology of Monsters

Electric rails are brought to life, rings that line the tunnel leading to the surface beginning to hum as they glow blue. The cradle, the sabot built around it, hums as the railing begins to energize. Three voices, its keepers in this prison, speak to him. Of targets. Angels. Tasks. Missions.

It listens. Acknowledges. It can feel the restraints loosening as they give their okay.

The rail line comes to power. The cradle launches, accelerated to fifteen times the speed of sound, the vacuum around the sabot cold and empty, only charged by the static. G-forces that would pulverize humans hammer against it, but it does not feel pain.

Miles it travels. Hundreds, maybe, before the tunnel ends and it is launched. The sabot peels away as it exits the shaft, the dead moon beneath it receding into the distance. Limbs frozen by armature and restraint, it hits the atmosphere and multiples of the speed of sound.

Fire and friction roar past against the purple and black armor. Deep within, beyond the brain and sensory organs and cyberization systems, the red Core deep within the chest begins to pulse.

"**Level 2 restrictions lifted.**"

The screws twist out. Awareness. The pumping of liquid fire through its veins, as the power begins to return to it.

"**Authorization received. Limited Core autonomy granted.**"

It can feel the Blue Patterns. It can feel the enemy.

"**Synchronization activated. Weapons suite, online. Level A2-9 Combat Killform: Activated.**"

The beat of the Core. The hum of the S2 organ. The armor obeys it once more.

"**Evangelion, Mark-09:**"

In the deep recesses of the armored mask, three eyes glow red.

"**RISE.**"

...

In the light and the heat and the roar of the detonated Lilim weapon, he feels his form beginning to burn. The sky turns white, a flash that blinds anything that looks upon it. From on high, it at first seems like a balloon, inflating outward as a solid ball of flame.

Next comes the shockwave. It outraces the fire, shattering windows, bending trees backwards, the clouds save for Nathanael dispersing as it roars through the air. Around the rising cloud of dust, ash, and flame, the soil begins to ignite. A ring of fire rises, heavy ash and incinerated soil wafting into the air as the wall of flame catches up to the wall of supersonic air.

The trees, bent and broken, ignite. They shatter as they burn, their remains carried through the air by the buffeting winds. Rising into the air, the ash and smoke form the familiar mushroom cloud, the white light of the opening flash slowly fading over the burn, charred, and dead landscape that surrounds the city...to reveal the orange dome surrounding the city itself, the milky white wall covering every building, every streets, every wall...and every life. The cheers of the followers of Armisael, and those Lilim who were saved by him echo through the air.

And then they realize that their protector was not within the dome with them. They look up, to see the white ring cracked, red and black, broken at the edges as it begins to unravel. A final gasp, and the ring shatters, raining white light down upon the city, down upon the earth as the apocalyptic thunderstorm that is Nathanael reforms.

Armisael can feel his awareness straining. He can feel his own fruit of life beginning to whither. And he can feel, as the darkness begins to overtake his own consciousness, the First of them, half a world away, reaching out its own consciousness to his own...and to somewhere else.

The petals of white, the remains, sink into the ground. The disparate remains of the awareness that was the Angel of the Unborn recedes, withering, the blackness overtaking it as it sinks deeper and deeper, shallower and shallower, the consciousness once more returning to the world of the White Egg, through darkness and night and into the great void...

And sees, for a fleeting moment, a great white Tree of Life.

Arise, my child.

For your end has not yet come.

In death, I have found you.

In oblivion, I have chosen you.

In life, I bless you.

And though this gift is not wanted,

Though this path the path of the other,

The world grows tainted. The enemy seeks to bring about the end of everything.

And you shall fight it.

For you are a Dominion.

The darkness recedes. The ground around Rio bursts, glowing white fronds bursting from the blackened ground. Around each white fine that rises, the soil once more becomes black and rich, green sprouts breaking through.

The flame and light and energy released from the Lilim weapon begins to rise, to flow into the fronds as they reach their apex around the city...

And form into a ring of light.

And the sun shines down upon the city as the dome of white expands once more.

Chapter 101:

The Psychology of Monsters

The curled fist of the sandalfim slams into the Zadkielim's face. The glowing, beady eyes of the Zadkielim lock with the vertical eyes of Junior just before he rushes him, tossing him through the air, Junior locking him in a grapple as he sends them both across the shelter.

Some cheer. Some scream louder, as now there are two kinds of

monsters battling it out in the shelter. The Zadkielim twists, wrapping its tail around Junior's head and slamming him into the wall, raising a cannon arm to the Sandalfim's head...

And then the vents burst open, and the prime Zadkielim and the other Zadkielim look up just as the hundreds of Israfim descend upon them, in defense of the Lilim.

...

Zwei approaches the sound barrier as the AT Field decompresses and launches him, the bow wave bending ammo buildings in its wake. The trail of the weaponized AT Field is joined by the contrails given off by the shoulder fins, the Eva passing over the length of Tokyo-3 itself. Zwei's foot catches on an office building, pulverizing it, the shift causing the red and white Evangelion to start flipping head over feet.

Like a red wheel of destruction, shouting, and pure raw speed, Zwei spins in a straight line across Tokyo-3. Office buildings, ammo buildings, and high rises collapses as the Evangelion strikes them, before it leaves the city limits and slams head first into the mountain on the other side. The mountain itself cracks. Rubble and stone roll down, the crimson giant laying motionless. Partially because of the impact.

Partially because the force and heat has fused the joints of the now rust colored armor.

In the entry plug, groaning, Uri's eyes cease their glow. The AT Field he tossed up around the Entry Plug, in tandem with the AT Field Zwei layered around himself, has prevented them both from dying.

It has not, however, prevented them from falling unconscious.

...

"Unit-02 is offline," Maya declares, stating the obvious in Central Dogma as the Big Screen shifts back to Zadkiel, as Go-kun closes the distance and hammers at its AT Field with his oversized fist, "Go-kun moving in to attack. Unit-07 has retrieved Progressive Lance from Ammo Building-7 and is closing in."

Drill whining to speed, Go-kun leaps the last distance, driving the weapon into and through Zadkiel's AT Fields, peppering the angelic white flesh with plasma bolts and rail projectiles from his shoulder fins. Zadkiel only smiles, moving through the conflagration, wrapping its tail around one of Go-kun's legs and flipping him with ease.

Rising, the damage to his wing healing as flesh liquifies and reforms, the Angel of Righteousness ne Might brings out its cannon arms. The flesh bubbles, the barrels dividing once, twice, until four glowing red barrels on each arm aim down upon Unit-05.

"Uh oh," Rei squeaks.

"Agreed."

Rei and Go-kun's eyes glow in unison, layers of AT Fields rising just as the cannons fire. The ground and armor beneath it give way under the blast, bolts and seams holding the armor layer up liquifying as Go-kun disappears into the earth. The giant falls, flailing, Rei and Go-kun screaming together as they drop towards the ground, scorched armor giving way and mechanical limbs going non responsive as they descend...

And hit a glowing field, sliding off of that and onto another, and another, their descent cushioned and directed as the Eva drops from the sky and into a tunnel, sparks flying along the walls and ceiling. Dropping into one of the Cages, restraints pop open and bring the Eva upright.

And on the catwalks at eye level with the Eva, five girls with blue hair, red eyes, and pale skin stand next to the red haired scientist, who brings up her PDA.

"Go-kun's been retrieved," Kyoko says, "Girls? Just like we practiced."

...

Whispers, then the wind beginning to shift. A multitude chorus, dancing through air molecules, moving them along a determined path, determined by man and not by nature. A faint spark accompanies each one, the sparks outlined in glowing blue, a brief flash as each spark forms a frame. A careful eye or a high powered, shielded camera would show the image.

An image of a gaggle, a clutch, or a murder (if you would use, but that would be a bad idea and it is a bad idea to give them bad ideas) of 4 to 7 year old children, outlined and glowing in blue. They share similar features. They have feminine, pretty faces, even the boys. Their hair, at least when not glowing blue, is graying blue, their eyes an odd combination of gold and red. Their clothes are a mix of sailor costumes, gothic dresses, and T shirts. The T shirts, all of them eggshell white, have lettering on them. Lettering which determines teams, purpose, sides.

In their war. Each shirt speaks one of two phrases like a battle cry:

Shinji is the Best!

Ichi's #1!

But today, they have put aside their civil war, put aside the ideological difference on whether they have the greatest uncle ever or the greatest aunt ever, to pool their newly discovered abilities.

And as the team works together, the styrofoam cup filled with hot chocolate travels through the air, into the office, and lands on the desk before the blue shapes disappear.

The door opens, and Kei takes the drink and sips, tapping her flickering monitor as Kaworu enters.

"Hold on," Kei says, sipping, "I'm looking at these power fluctuation reports. We're getting odd EM signals around the base."

"I was going to ask about the same thing," Kaworu responds, "Any news from Agent Kaji?"

"Not yet," Kei says, "Thanks for the hot drink, by the way."

Kaworu blinks. Raising an eyebrow, he turns, shrugs, and turns back.

"I...didn't bring that."

On the windowsill, looking into the room through the glass pane, the dove cocks its head and flies away.

...

The restraints on the progressive lance pop open, the blade on a stick

longer than the Eva is tall released to Unit-07's possession as the cross of light the color of inflamed flesh rises above the outskirts of the city. Inside the entry plug, beads of sweat dissolve into the LCL.

This is very, very bad, he thinks. Zwei's down, Go-kun just got blasted into the Geofront, and he's alone against the monster. Then again, he muses, tilting his head as he wills Unit-07 to heft up the spear, that isn't that different from a good three quarters of his time in an Eva.

"Okay," he says, "On three."

Spinning the lance, he swings it up as Zadkiel charges, slicing through the lower part of the Angel's mouth and sending a spray of white past the Eva, staining the armor. Bringing up the shaft of the spear, it catches one of Zadkiel's blades, bringing up the butt into the face of the Angel.

"God dammit," he growls, "Stay down, for f-"

The Angel swings, driving a blade into Unit-07's torso. JA-Tan screams between Shinji's ears, the blade cutting through armor, flesh and bone. And grinding his teeth, Shinji's will supplants the Eva's own, as two hands wrap around Zadkiel's throat and begin to squeeze.

...

A blast. Metal walls shake, white bolts popping from sheet metal. Wuffles squeezes, his form shifting, compressed bladders turning the flatfish completely flat as he slides through the entrance and flies off. The walls blast open, and the Zadkielim fly out after, the lilim forgotten and several Israfim still hanging off them, clawing and blasting as the Zadkielim pursue their prey through the shafts and corridors of the armor layers.

Traitor, the mind of Zeruel screams over the mind of Zadkiel, **We told you that you would die if you acted against us! You knew the consequences!**

And your mistake, brother, Junior responds, twisting in mid flight as the Zadkielim all bare teeth, **Was thinking I was foolish enough to face you alone.**

Vent covers pop open, and two pale blurs slam into the Zadkielim. Two go down instantly, the Prime looking back, snarling before the

floor below shreds and a metal fist slams into his jaw.

The metal effigy of Junior rises on jets, four energy casts glowing on the ends of its tentacles as Siyon and Hatchi leap off their unconscious Zadkielim targets and bound off the walls at the others.

...

The foot comes down on the outskirts of Tokyo-3, a flock of doves evacuating their perches and flying skyward. Hands around the throat of the angel, the black and green Evangelion squeezes, trying to force the breath and life from the larger, serpentine creature as it is pushed further and further back towards the city.

Something catches his eye. A shape of silver and gray, passing by the sun. Shinji looks up, Unit-07 following his will, to see the clouds parting and twisting, following the new arrival as it speeds at supersonic speeds through the sky. Pulling from the Angel, Unit-07 leaps out of the way, and Zadkiel only gets a chance of a strained gurgle before the Mark-09 slams fists-first into the Angel.

White blood sprays, the birds in the outer rings of Tokyo-3 abandoning their perches and flying off into the sky and safer pastures. Rising first, the Mark-09 brings up a three fingered fist. Plasma casters build into the palm and wrist come to life, covering the metal gauntlet with a sphere of flame before it brings its fist down upon Zadkiel's face.

Again.

And again.

And again.

...

The door gives way, and Kaji rushes into the white room, the sounds of Spencer's kill team behind him. The sounds of gears, scraping metal of their combat implants, the sounds of pursuit fade out behind him. All this is replaced by the sounds of a churning engine and passing rails.

Opening his eyes, Kaji stares down the length of the train car.

It is a nice car, at least. It seems to be one of the normal, new models they have zooming aorund Tokyo-3 when it isn't under attack by an Angel. But instead of circling the fortress city, the car seems to be circling, at first glance out of the window, Hell.

The blasted landscape rolls past. The world, not this world, is displayed for him to witness. And upon witnessing its expanse and emptiness, the man lets loose a soft, breathless,

"What."

A door opens. Something skitters along, feet scraping the metal. He turns, and finds an Israfim. But not the foot high pets. Instead, this one is his height, red and silver colored and tilting a three hole face. It stares at Kaji. Then it looks down and stares at the four year old, blue haired, red eyed vaguely malevolent girl.

Well, shit. You weren't supposed to be here.

...

The Zadkielim's back slams into the wall, caving in the metal, plumes of pulverized earth forced through the white lined seems and rivets. The metal fist comes back and slams into the white serpent's face, sending stainless steel rivets flying out of their place, along with a handful of teeth.

Hatchi and Siyon handle the other two, breaking arms and wings in a pale blur, as the mecha and the Sandalim corner the Prime. Smiling, the Alpha Zadkielim pushes off the wall, grabbing the Wuffletron's arm as it punches again and bringing up a blade arm, severing it in a shower of sparks.

Pulling back his lips to a shark-like smile, he swings at Junior, driving the blade arm deep into flesh...

And Junior does not fall.

You're a fool, brother.

Junior's fist strikes the Zadkielim across the face, backfisting him and sending him spinning back. Siyon and Hatchi both have pinned the

Zadkielim at the bottom of the corridor, as Junior floats forward, cracking the five knuckles on each finger, twitching his mouth tendrils as the Zadkielim's eyes glow red.

"**You should be dead,**" Zeruel's voice echoes.

I should be. I am not. This is your fault, of course.

The Zadkielim swings the blade arm again. Junior grabs the blade with his bare hand, pushing it aside, momentum carrying the jouten into another punch which sends it reeling.

I am very disappointed. You did something wonderful, Zeruel. Your lesser body, combined with the embryo of the Cherubim, created something new. You created something magnificent.

Another swing. Junior catches the blade, white icho running down his palm.

A new Angel. Another intelligence. Another of us, to take the place of our fallen brothers. And what do you do?

The vertical eyes narrow. A disappointed twitch of the mouth tendrils.

You subjugate it. You enslave it. You're pathetic, Zeruel.

The Zadkielim pulls back, bringing both of the cannon arms forward and letting loose a torrent of flesh colored flame...which reflects off an AT Field, the orange octagon hanging in the air between them.

"**How. How are you not falling?**"

Junior extends a finger. The Zadkielim follows it, turning...and sees a white dove, sitting perched on one of the jagged remains of the shelter walls.

And Zeruel screams.

...

Kaji feels a tug at his hand. Looking down, he finds a four year old girl with pale skin, blue hair, and red eyes staring back up at him. She narrows her eyes, flushes her cheeks, and turns from him to the man sized Israfim which has proceeded to tap his foot on the ground and fold his arms.

"Interesting," Almacia says, "This must confirm that we have souls. We had coincidental proof from our ability to become electromagnetic projections, but this is undeniable proof. Fascinating."

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Kaji asks, and before she can answer turns back to the Israfim, "And...uh...what're you? You're easily the biggest Israfim I've ever seen-"

Duh. 'Cause I'm not an Israfim, I'm IsraFEL and this is kind my train car. What're you doin' here, Lilim?

...

A pulse of light. A roar of sound, followed by the cheers and adulations of thousands, and the ring of light bursts into existence. The blackened charred ground cracks, new green life sprouting from beneath, called into life by the ascension of the land's guardian.

Reborn, remade, the Angel of Life rises, the light of his soul expanding out and quenching the fire as it pours down. A whine, the air going still, and the ring of light flashes. A shockwave not of air but of physics defying orange light expands up and out, extinguishing the fire that is Nathanael, quenching the cloud of flame hovering above and revealing the throbbing red Core that hovers at the center.

The ring breaks, the white unfolding into a chain, a repeating twisting white ladder that any watching biologists would recognize as the theoretical model for DNA. Armisael uncoils, swerving downward as Nathanael roars, the air around him shifting to carry the noise and bluster.

And Armisael becomes a straight line, lancing upwards from Rio and through Nathanael's core.

The air turns silent. The city watches mutely, even the worshippers. Armisael coils around the Core, wrapping himself around it, containing it within him.

Be at peace, brother. You shall not die. I have seen what can be done.

The sky turns white, as if struck by flint.

This is not an ending.

A roar of flame and sound, the clouds around Rio parting, the sky turning blue and clear, the sun shining down upon them.

But a beginning.

But they realize it is not the Sun that shines down. Instead, it is the sphere of red fire at the center of Armisael, the subsumed and restored Core of Nathanael pulsing at the center of the ring of light.

...

Something moves underneath the armor of Go-kun's massive left arm. The armor bulges around the forearm, white lines running along the seams of metal.

A slow moan escapes Go-kun's speakers.

"**Wait,"** he says, "**Something isn't right.**"

The girls stop. Kyoko taps a display on her PDA, bringing up a holographic schematic of the arm. Layers fold out, layers of the appendage that Go-kun received during the multiverse travel he and Rei did during Leliel's attack.

"I'm reading tissue damage," Kyoko says, "It seems to be gradual, but it looks like you have parts of the armor bent inward. It looks like it's damaged a sort of seal that was made over the actual flesh itself. Is that bad?"

A line of white opens wider. Something gurgles beneath the armor.

"**Yes. That is very bad.**"

...

The fist comes down, again and again, on the Core of Zadkiel. Teeth fly. Flesh tears. The grey and silver Evangelion continues its attack, pressing its attack with pure, berserk force. Whatever it is, it is a reprieve. Shinji can feel JA-Tan's relief like a palpable thing, running the palms of his plugsuit's gloves over the handles, willing Unit-07's hand up against the transparent dome of force surrounding the Mark-09 and the Angel.

"Alright," he says, "JA-Tan, get ready to extend your field. Let's help him out."

Extending its hands, Unit-07 advances, slow marching forward as the olive mecha presses its AT Field against the dome surrounding the Angel and True Eva.

The air feels like water and gravel. The intensity of the field gives him a feeling of deja vu, like the first battle against ADAM those months ago.

Pushing through, like a wall of plastic, like a river of thick mud, he grits his teeth as he reflects the AT Field off of JA-Tan's own. Working in synch, the gunmetal gray hands push against the dome.

And Zadkiel screams. Mouth opens, teeth bared, it looses a high pitched, enraged scream, bringing both cannon arms up and loosing a blast of red light which punches through the Mark-09's armor and exits through the back. Stumbling back, the true Evangelion drops to its knees, the Angel rising as it continues screaming, and plunges its knife arm into the Eva's chest.

"Uh oh," Shinji whispers, "Okay, JA-Tan, that's bad, run like he-"

A flash. The ground shakes. A beam of light bursts from the chest of the Mark-09, consuming it, consuming Zadkiel, the armor plates beneath them giving way.

And then last thought that goes through Shinji's mind as the waves of white overtake him and Unit-07 are *gee, that's what an S2 exploding looks li*

...

The ground shakes. The lift catapult shudders, the carriage holding the Mark-01 warping and bending as it rises. Alarms and shrieks from Dogma wail over the speakers in the entry plug, and Zyuu clenches her eyes shut, a cold pit of fear weighing down her stomach.

Oddly enough, as the armor warps and the light overtakes them, Ichi is herself completely calm.

Huh, she says, *That's new.*

...

It could be seen from high orbit. The S2 engine of the Mark-09 detonating as Zadkiel, himself, self-destructs. The resulting blast wave tears a hole into the armor layer surrounding the Geofront. Those still on the surface are given only a split second warning before the blast wave shatters them standing.

Those beneath are given a split second as the blast wave collapses the armor layers down into the Geofront itself.

Within the corridor deep below, Junior watches as the light leaves the Prime Zadkielim's eyes, as the two Ree beside him look up, pupils dialating and shoulders shaking as the first shockwave hits the base.

So it must be, Junior says, **It's time to end it.**

...

And two eyes open with a gasp. A grunt, a heave of his chest, and Shinji awakens. Sitting up, he promptly notices three things.

First, he's in a t-shirt and shorts, not his plug suit.

Second, he's not dead.

Third, he's in his bedroom.

In Misato's apartment.

Blinking, he rubs his eyes, rolling off of the bed and crashing onto the floor. His arms and legs feel weak, weaker than they should. But he climbs to his hands and feet all the same, shaking his head to shake out the drowsiness.

Quickly throwing on a pair of jeans, he stumbles out of the bedroom. Misato and Pen Pen are snoring on the couch. His phone is on the coffee table, and he stumbles over, picking it up and opening it.

The voice mailbox is full. He disconnects the phone from the charger. His body feels stiff, but he feels he needs to walk. Stumbling out, slipping on his shoes, he exits the apartment.

Night time, and Tokyo-3 is still. No moving cars, no horns or sounds save for him walking down the street from Misato's apartment building.

The lights are on, lining the street, white and silver street lamps rising high above. It gives the city an ethereal glow, matching the emptiness, the silence.

A trill, and Shinji looks down to find the phone beeping. Ringing. Flipping it open, he brings it up to his ear.

"Hello?"

"*NERV-LUNA status report. MAGI-32(Durandal) reporting. All systems nominal. Food supplies at 28%. Hydroponics nominal. Construction of Evangelion Mark-08 steady at 57%."*

"Uh...hello?"

"*Please respond. Pilot: Ikari, Shinji."*

He blinks. He remembers that name, from somewhere. Not his name, but the name of the MAGI.

"Uh...yes? Yes, this is Pilot Ikari. Who is this?"

"*Ah. Excellent. Listen carefully, Pilot Ikari. This is*"

The phone goes dead. Walking past the electronics store, he jumps as the tvs and radios all turn on, blasting classical music. Scrambling to his feet, rubbing his ass, he stares at the storefront as he continues walking.

Lights turn brighter, illuminating the street light a sunrise, bathing everything in white and silver light.

Stepping into a puddle, a flock of doves coo and fly past, one whispering in his ear something intelligent but alien, and Shinji turns to a storefront to see his reflection. He is still pale, his hair still blue, and red eyes stare back at him.

Continuing to walk, he notices the street becoming less and less smooth, paved cement giving way to gravel. He passes the outskirts of Tokyo-3, where there should be the hole from Zadkiel exploding, but

only steps onto the smooth pane of glass instead.

More steps.

More walking. Apartments become dimmer and smaller, mounds rising with ethereal light. He can see the ammo buildings high over Tokyo-3, the Tokyo-3 Mall and Community Center bathed in white, light paint flaking off of it. Like paint flaking off of the world.

Glass cracks under his feet, grinding against the soles of his sneakers. The grass beneath his feet has broken through the glass, and there is life here, but he doesn't know exactly where he is.

And he looks up, as day breaks, and the dawn comes as the sun rises over the horizon over the world.

And then Shinji realizes that the Sun that shines down is *white*.

Chapter 102: Triumphant

The White Sun shines down on Shinji, in the blasted, glass plane. It all seems familiar to him, somehow. He seems to remember this place, somehow.

"Okay," Shinji says, "Um..maybe...I suppose...all the times we've ended the world have made the...let's say standard for ending the world a little lower. Because I'm not sure if an Eva self destructing is supposed to completely screw up reality."

He pauses, folds his arms, and taps his foot on the glass plane. More green shoots are popping from the glass. A dove lands in front of him, tilts its head, and flies away.

"Well...I dunno. I don't know what goes into an Eva in the first place, so...huh."

He scratches his head. Turning around, he sees that Tokyo-3 is looking more normal. Some of the white has left the light, some of the ethereal effect and haze beginning to clear up. The sky is bright yellow, now, like those times Lilith would mess with his head.

"Huh. Well. Okay," he says, and sighs, shrugging, "Okay. Let's...let's trace our steps. I was in Unit-07. The Mark-09 got taken down waaaaay easier than it should have, and it and the Angel, which for some reason sounded a lot like Zeruel, exploded. But I'm not dead, I think. What else."

He turns back from Tokyo-3, back to the outskirts which are more green now. He can even see the first traces of an actual road, albeit cracked and gravel, with some glass covering it.

"Okay," he says, "What happened. Really. I need to figure out what happened. And why the entire city's silent."

He blinks. The sky is yellow. Why is the sky yellow, he asks himself.

And he looks up, staring, against all rationality, directly at the sun.

And the sun moves, shifting in place, to shine down directly on Shinji Ikari.

"*How did (did [did {did you break free} you find me] you see) know?"*

Chapter 71:

Triumphant

A scream. Ripped from the form he had inhabited, torn from the power he commanded, the world once more becomes amber fluid and glass walls. Awareness snaps back to the small, rough edged fragment, preserved for its own good, in the glass cylinder deep beneath NERV-Berlin.

He continues screaming.

Rage.

Pain.

Anger.

All conveyed through the wail coming forth through the speakers in the sterile white lab beneath the Second Branch.

But no one is there to hear him.

Save for one, of course. One being, far below him, buried by years and sediment, dimly aware of the anger and rage. Someone unaffected by the great plots up above, sleeping through the aeons as it is wont to.

And it, too, begins to stir.

...

He floats, aimless. He remembers, feels the impact. Rocking back and forth inside the entry plug, casting his own AT Field with Zwei's to save them both.

And he finds himself in the darkness, once more. Between life and death. Between awareness and oblivion. He floats, aimless. Like in the depths of the Core of Unit-03, near death at the hands of Raziel. And once more, he sees it, like the faded memory in the back of his mind.

Once more he sees the rippling across the field of his mind, expanding outwards, lines of light becoming more and more complex over time, going from a single line into the expanding, all consuming Tree of Life.

And once more, not a memory but present and aware, it speaks to him.

Arise, my child.

For your moment has come.

In darkness, I found you.

In defeat, I chose you.

In victory, I blessed you.

Though your gifts have been muted

And your incubation long

The time has come to take your place.

You are my sword and shield.

You are my vanguard.

You shall be the light that casts away the darkness,

For you are a Dominion.

And the Sun rises over Tokyo-3.

...

A groan, and she rises off the floor. Blinking the haze out of her eyes, she reaches up, grabbing the edge of the wood and metal desk and using it as leverage to pull herself to her feet. Her legs creak and her knees pop in protest, like they hadn't been used in days. Weeks. Months.

Looking up at the glass case holding the design blueprints of Unit-01, she sees her hair matted to the left half of her face, the left lens of her glasses cracked.

And her cell phone, ringing.

Flipping it open, stumbling to her desk and the waiting bottle of advil, she brings it up to her ear.

"Yes?"

"*Dr. Ikari. This is NERV-LUNA AI Durandal. Please respond."*

"Responding."

"*Confirmation code.*"

"Yee Cat Hector Aibo."

"*...checking...confirmation code accepted. Stand by- YUI! Is that you?"*

The voice changed, going from the regular melody of Durandal's voice to the excited voice of the Director of NERV-Luna.

"Tom? What's wrong?"

"*What's wrong? Do you have any idea how long we've been trying to get in contact with any of you? Durandal just got in contact with the Third but he got cut off before he could confirm!"*

"Yes...what? We've been out of contact? For how long?"

Muttering on the other end, arguments back and forth. A delay, the light seconds it takes for the signal to go back and forth between NERV-1 and Luna.

"*Yui. Get down to Central Dogma. You need to see this."*

...

The light floods, washing over the blasted plane of the Angelic Overmind. The glassed ground cracks and shatters, becoming dirt and soul as the green sprouts burst through. It begins off the horizon, past the mountains that speak with thunder, past the blackened sky and the shattered giants. It begins as light, flooding red and gold like liquid flame over the sky.

In the car, circling the plane, Israfel twists his face, as Kaji stares out the window transfixed.

"What is that?" he asks.

A new beginning, Israfel says, **The kid's been sleeping. But now he's waking up. And everyone else's waking up with him.**

The Angel of Song and Poetry rubs the back of his hand over one of the three holes, the one on the upper right of his mask like face.

As far as entrances go, I think he's about tied with Big Z. Not on destruction, mind you. But, I mean, in style.

Kaji blinks, turning from the rising sun.

"Okay, I missed something. What exactly is happening."

Israfel twists his face. Holding onto Kaji's hand, Almacia perks an eyebrow.

It's simple, Lilim. You've been sleeping. All of you. And now it's time to wake up.

...

Over Tokyo-3, the sphere rises. Not the Sun, but a Sun. A new Sun, born of the world, born of the White Egg and nurtured in the Black Egg. It rises over the city, bathing it in its light as it rises, a perfect sphere of light but not of flame. If one looks past the brilliance, one would see it is composed entirely of orange and gold, shifting octagonal fields interlocked into a near perfect sphere.

And if one looked past that,

Past the fields of light, past the barriers of the soul, past the imagined machinery holding it in place and past the red ichor forming the heart of the construct,

One would see the floating form of Uriel Sohryu, eyes open and blazing with gold light.

...

In defiance of He who is called "I AM", I have risen.

Though I have walked this Earth for a lifetime, I have risen.

I am the first of the Dominions.

Vanguard of the protectors.

I am a child of the White Egg, incarnate in a child of the Black Egg,

And I am the Shield to them both.

I have walked through the Fire

And I have suffered through the Shadow.

And I am tempered as Steel.

I am the Sword of God.

Angel of the Sun.

I am Uriel.

And I have Risen.

...

The green pushes through, washing over the world of the Overmind as the golden sun rises high in the sky. It shines down, liquid light washing over the world of the Black Egg, filling it, completing it. The dank skies clear, the eidoleons marking the edge of the world leaning back, basking in its glow.

"What is that?" Kaji asks.

Something new, Israfel responds, **Something wonderful. I don't believe it, but she did it. She actually did it.**

"Did what?"

She made the right circumstances, made the right situation for a new Angel to appear. Well, we all knew the kid was going to be powerful, but she got him to manifest in the best way possible.

Kaji blinks. The sunlight doesn't hurt his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

I mean that every time you kill an Angel, you take away something fundamental. When Shamsel bought it, our world went dark. When Sandalphon ate lightning and shit himself with

the THUNDAH, our world went barren. The kid's given our world something we never thought we'd have another of.

On the three hole face of the Angel, Kaji could swear, if only momentarily, that there is a smile.

He gave us a sunrise.

...

The light washes over Tokyo-3, casting away the haze of white. It pushes the white past the barriers of the city, pushes it past the wafting clouds surrounding the countryside. The light pours out, more than simple illumination but the physical manifestation of the Angel of the Sun, rising high into the sky as the sphere of impossible machinery and concentrated AT Fields forces back the haze.

The remains of Zadkiel disappear, an awareness returning to a womb beneath the city.

The remains of the Mark-09 disappear, and something stirs, an awareness taking hold far away, memories present in the mind of the creature, which quickly retreats, pulling itself out of the datacores of the four girls as the world goes to Hell around them.

Zwei's eyes light up in Cage-02, the Eva looking about, confused. In Cage-03, Unit-01's eyes glow yellow.

Throughout Tokyo-3, people awaken, slowly, stirring sluggishly from their beds, from their floors and sofas, from the steering wheels of their cars as light returns.

And from orbit, the satellites hovering around Earth record the wafting light as it is pushed back, out of Japan, out of Asia, circumventing the entire planet before it disappears completely.

And the Sun over Tokyo-3 disappears, Uriel Sohryu slowly lowering himself to the top of one of the tilting, totaled ammo building. And when he opens his eyes, they are still glowing gold.

...

High above, past orbit, past the moon, between the Earth and Venus,

the light recedes, flowing back into its point of origin. And the white shape that was a sun to the Earth resumes its true form, of the Bird of Light.

"*I see (see [understand {concede}]).*"

...

The cameras come on line, dusty computer screens in Central Dogma displaying the cracked hole in the Geofront. The camera pans, lights flicking on over the ceiling, vents coming online and sucking out the particulate dust and cobwebs, Ritsuko coughing between sips of coffee. Leaning against Makoto's chair, Aoi in Aoba's chair, Yui watches the Big Screen, watching the panning view.

They see the pyramid of NERV-1. Cracked open, like an eggshell. They see the discarded, broken Dirac Array, still spewing white, the faint rift of a portal between the bent and warped focusing blades. They see one of Go-kun's legs, embedded in the ground where it was blasted off.

And then they see it. Almost one and a half times the size of an Eva. Gray where it was black, red shards spread around it like blood around a bullet riddled corpse.

The gray, decaying corpse of the Angel of Might.

Zeruel.

"Displaying download from NERV-Luna," Maya says, voice still scratchy, "Director Sheldon is on the line."

A second, the 2 light second delay from NERV-Luna to Earth, and the speakers whine.

"Thanks, Lieutenant," the drawl accented voice of the Director of the sole permanent Lunar base says, his 'image' on the screen a line which distorts with his words, *"Here's what we know. Solar Satellites picked it up the day after you destroyed the Angel of Might."*

The Big Screen distorts and blurs. A point of white, appearing and flying off from the Moon, flying at speeds impossible for human craft. Which is besides the point, as it is by definition not human.

"We read a definite Blue Pattern on it, but since we don't have any Evas yet and the Interceptor project's still in crafting stage, we couldn't intercept it. It positioned itself between Earth and Venus, and the Blue Pattern started spreading."

The point of light folds out, becoming a bird. Two wings, talons of white, unfold from it, a V shape spread out with jagged points running along its length. Two wings fold down, a third along the way of the larger, main wings. Stubby, blunt lines that resemble legs run down from it, ending in curling tendrils. More tendrils appear, lining the wings, waving in the solar wind.

"We estimated it was at least a half dozen kilometers from wing tip to wing tip. It was fucking with every monitoring satellite we had, though, so we're not sure. All we know was this:"

The image of the Earth fast forwards. A white light, a haze, hits Tokyo-3 first. And it begins to spread. Spreading from the city to the countryside, accelerating instantly. They watch, open mouth, gaping, as the light spreads through Japan. Then Asia. Then Europe and Australia, and beyond. Encircling the world.

"*Since the Angel appeared, Earth has been completely out of contact. We've been monitoring the situation and trying to finish the Mark-08, but we've been out of parts. The MAGI here's been repurposing space for hydroponics, which is why we're still alive."*

"Wait," Yui asks, "How long have we been out of contact, Tom? How long has the Angel been up there?*"*

...

In the office of the Supreme Commander of NERV, said supreme commander comes to with a loud groan. During whenever whatever happened...happened...he was in mid motion of sitting down. So hence, he wakes up on the floor, vision blurry, one arm of his glasses on his nose, the cracked lenses on the floor from where they dropped.

Blinking, he sits up, grabbing at the edge of his desk and pulling himself up, a gloved hand rubbing up against his face...and he stops. Walking across the mausoleum as he clicks his remote and the lights turn on, he presses his hand against the hidden panel. The alcove opens, revealing the spacious, white tiled bathroom, with the full bath, full shower with a seat that Yui had installed, and the marble

stand along sink with three faucets, sitting underneath the mirrored medicine cabinet.

Pulling himself to the sink, he presses the cabinet door closed and stares at his reflection. Gendo Ikari has prided himself on many things. Determination. Willpower. Intelligence. Never his beard, though.

He knows how others looked at it. They stared, shuddered. Whispers of 'creepy uncle', 'Commander Beardman,' 'The Soul Eater' were shared, all where they foolishly believed he could not hear.

But now, he stares at his reflection. The frame is fuller, going up his cheeks instead of simply lining his jaw. It is thick, dark brown hair, covering his chin, surrounding his mouth, defined and rugged.

Gendo Ikari looks at his face in the mirror. In particular, he looks at the defined, dark, full beard that now adorns his face.

"I'll keep it," he says, and exits to the lift to Central Dogma.

...

The white sun looks down upon Shinji. It moves, it unfolds, becoming a bird of light over the verdant green of the Angelic Overmind. He can feel the pressing of the Angel's mind against his, the probing questions, statements, and faint cords of music worming through his awareness. This is...alien...he thinks. Alien. Not wrong, but *alien.* And he realizes how wrong he is to think it can be so easily confronted.

"You're...you're an Angel."

"Yes (Yes [How {I am 15.09.2761.81 designate observertestingadvancement form} observant] I am Arael) I am."

"But...but," Shinji stammers, "You're...how? All the other Angels have been...monsters."

"*We are (not simply [more than {we are the mechanism of life eternal} monsters] monsters) what we must be."*

"I...I don't understand."

"Lilith (Lilith [Lilith {Lilith}])."

He blinks. A flower grows at his foot, green and silver and blue.

"Lilith? What about Lilith?"

"She has (wakes [tampered with {favors your geneline} the experiment] still, dreaming eternal) begun to stir."

The world quakes. The ground shifts beneath Shinji, as something descends from on high. A giant, as large as an Evangelion from Shinji's perspective, baring a halo upon his head and descending upon translucent wings of light.

"Tabris (Tabris [Tabris {My brother}])."

"**Arael!**" the giant booms, "**What have you *done?"***

A small laugh, lyrical, casting airs of classical music.

"*I have done (created [brought the {saved us all} next age] wonders) the impossible."*

And the light recedes, and Shinji collapses face first onto the sidewalk of Tokyo-3. Rolling onto his back, fresh blood flowing from his nose, he reaches up to his forehead, staring at the now yellow Sun high in the sky. And he smiles slightly as he sees Asuka hovering over him, her face frantic, before passing out.

...

Red eyes blink, and open, and the blue haired, pale young woman sits up, rising from the desk to find that she now has a very unfamiliar, very splitting headache. Her memories are foggy. She remembers...she remembers something about a pillow. About children with her face and Kaworu's eyes. About white giants and...but nothing...solid.

The last concrete memory she had was talking with Mom on the phone. And talking with Grandfather about working at the Second Branch.

Running a hand through her hair, she sits up in her grandfather's desk chair, the half filled out contract for employment at NERV-2 on the desk, a faint line where she passed out. She blinks, again. And again.

Rising from the comfortable, leather chair, she walks across the office, sneakers slapping along the carpet. The door opens automatically, pressing the button for the residence. The lift speeds up as she rubs

her temples, reminding her of that one time when she was 10, and she and Rei switched for a few days for her birthday, and she got into some of Little M...into some of Mom's coffee.

The doors open, and she exits into the Makinami estate, her current home. Blinking as one of the maids runs by, she walks down the hallway, following the remember path to the study, where she normally finds Kaworu at this time of day. She can finish the contract later. She has the time.

Opening the door, she enters the study, opening her mouth to greet her boyfriend and her grandfather...and stops. She stares, along with them, at the figure now sitting in Kaworu's plush, favorite leather and suede reading chair. The laughter is accompanied by a steady, whirring click, as old wrinkled lips part into a gleaming white smile.

"You are rendered, of course, speechless by my sudden recovery. I am flattered for the attention you are giving me. Truly I am."

A small laugh, the wizened hand wrapping around the red gem atop the black and steel walking stick.

"Now then," Lorenz Kihl says, "I believe we need to discuss what exactly has happened..."

...

Sleeping technicians wake, some bent over the uneven geology of the Geofront surrounding the sight of the final battle. Some asleep at their cranes and pulleys. Lieutenant Shigeru Aoba, the man in charge of this branch of the recovery operation, finds himself pinned under one of the Big Dog robots, which somehow got out of its pen and is currently buzzing in his ear.

Tossing it off, he sits up, looking past it and at the prone form of Unit-05's torso.

"Okay," he says, "That's...okay. Everyone, let's get back to work!"

Climbing to his feet, giving a dirty look to the deactivated robot dog body, and mutters to himself as he walks to the crane that overlooks the prone Evangelion torso. Parts of Go-kun are still spread throughout the Geofront- the torso itself, containing his Core and more importantly his experimental S2 engine, are the top priority,

even if his right arm is missing and all four of his legs have been severed by Zeruel's blast.

"Okay," Aoba yells, tapping his PDA and switching it over to 'transmit' function, relaying his voice to the rest of the crew, "Jenkins, get the crane powered up. We want more support on his left shoulder joint. Paulson, Peters, get the hydraulic lifts set up underneath him! We get him to the Cage 5 lift and the E's will take it from there-"

A crackle, and Aoba winces as one of his subordinates yells full blast into his ear.

"*Lieutenant! I'm reading activity coming from 05's Core! It looks like Unit-05's self-activating again!"*

Aoba nods.

"Alright! Looks like our job's getting easier!"

He taps the PDA again, switching over to 'loudspeaker,' and brings it up to his mouth, pushing his grimy long hair back.

"Hey, Go-kun! If you're feeling up to it, we could use a hand getting you back to the base!"

A gurgle escapes the massive Evangelion's jaw. His v-shaped visor lights up gold, and his left hand clenches and unclenches, the armor along it cracked and some of it sticking into the Eva's own flesh, yellow and black staining the green metal. Pressing a fist into the ground, the Eva forces itself up, flipping onto his stomach. Throwing out his arm, massive fingers dig into the ground, dragging the Evangelion.

"See, what'd I tell you?" Aoba says, "He practically does our job for us!"

A groan escapes the Evangelion. Its armor, jagged, cracked, leaves long grooves in the ground. The whining shriek from the armor and overstressed servos, Aoba punching up the channel to Central Dogma to report the progress. Which is when, at that moment, Aoba realizes that the direction Go-kun is pulling himself in is not the direction of the waiting carriage and lift. Instead, he realizes, tilting his head...

That Go-kun is dragging himself towards Zeruel.

"O...kay," he says, and walks after the Eva, "Hey! Go-kun! Wrong way!

Lift is that way!"

He sighs, bringing up his PDA.

"Dogma, this is Aoba," he says, "Can someone get Rei down to the Geofront? That last hit to Go-kun's apparently messed up his sense of direction. He's heading away from the lift and he-"

The hand comes up again, and down. Instead of hitting dirt and grass, it hits something soft, gray, and fleshy. The fingers wrap into a fist, wrapping around one of the gray black tendrils of the slain Angel of Might.

And the flesh begins flowing into the Eva's palm.

...

Shinji's eyes open. The ceiling is familiar, but not his own, the white tile and soft florescent lights jobbing his memory, telling him that it's the ceiling of the NERV infirmary. Groaning, he brings up his fingers and rubs his temples, before pulling himself up in a sitting position and finding Asuka leaning back in the chair next to the bed, eyes closed and chest rising and falling with each breath.

He has a feeling of deja vu. Of familiarity. Wincing, he rubs his temples, sifting through his memories.

He remembers, yes. He remembers like a...like a passive observer. Like being on the outside, looking in. Like he wasn't invested in a single thing that was happening.

"Why do I remember?" he asks.

A snap in the air. A small giggle. Looking up, he sees her standing across the infirmary. Skin marble white, hair like light flowing out, her eyes solid red, dressed in a school uniform.

Why not?

"Lilith?" he asks.

You asked me, why do you remember. I say, why not?

He blinks. She smiles, hands folded behind her.

"You...sound different."

There are many aspects to an individual, Ikari-kun. I am but one aspect of myself. I send another into the dream Arael had created, and unfolded over our world.

"Is that why I remember? Is that why I remember everything?"

Lilith nods, a warm smile on her face. He blinks, and she is in front of him, her hands cupping his cheeks.

"**The right person, in the right place, can change the world.**"

"Me?"

"You have been disconnected. You have felt like you were looking in upon the world. The only time in it you felt real was when you gave into a nature like your sisters'. I shielded you from the effects of Arael's unfolding dream."

"Why?" he asks, shaking his head, her hands falling away, "Why me? Why *me* of all people? I couldn't *do* anything!"

"Do you really believe that, Ikari-kun?"

He says nothing. Memories, more of them. Bringing Ichi out of her shell. Camping with his father. Connecting with his sisters.

"That...it was all a dream. I never did any of that."

"But you thought you did. You can do it again. You can put aside your hesitation, your doubt. You can be who you want to be. You have the chance to save the world."

He opens his mouth, closes it wordless.

"Me," he says, "Why me?"

"**I offer you Godhood, Ikari-kun. I offer you power. I offer you control over all life that originates within me. What do you say?**"

"Why?"

Lilith smiles.

"**And that is why I chose you. Your mother, as special as she is to me, would say 'How?'.**"

She leans in, presses her lips against his cheek, and she is gone, only a faint warm breeze where she was. He hears Asuka yawn, turning to her as she opens blue eyes, smiling as she sees him sitting up. He hops off the bed, his feet shaky. He's still in his pajamas, his shorts and t-shirt, he realizes. But he doesn't feel chilly.

In fact, he feels warm.

Comfortable.

"How do you f-feel?" she asks.

He smiles, despite himself.

"Better," he says, "Better than I have for a while."

He walks over, taking her hand and helping her up. And then the alarms start blaring and everything goes to Hell.

...

Maya is still staring at the screen, at the vibrating audio pattern from NERV-Luna. Kyoko hasn't said a word for the past five minutes, and Pieter is still staring dumbstruck at the Big Screen, and the image of Earth, covered in the white light.

"Seven weeks," Yui says, "We've been...we've been under attack by that Angel for *seven weeks?* How are we still *alive?"*

"*Best guess is that the Angel put you all in stasis of some sort, Yui. We've read weird readings in South America and Australia. The Australia readings cut out about five weeks ago, but the South America ones were going on until the entire field lifted."*

"Do you have anything more specific?"

Ritsuko, speaking. She is keeping a level head, but that is practically in her job description- be calm where Yui and Kyoko aren't.

"Negative on that, Dr. Akagi. Zeruel's entry wrecked most of our surveillance satellites."

A shriek of static. The Big Screen folds out another panel, a yell and a crash in the background as Aoba's face appears.

"*Dogma, this is Aoba! We've got a SERIOUS F_ING PROBLEM!"*

"Lieutenant, can this wait?" Misato asks, leaning on Makoto's console, "We're still trying to figure out what the heck just happened down here and-"

"*No! No, this can't wait! LOOK!"*

The viewpoint on the screen moves, over the cracked, torn landscape of the Geofront, zooming past the rising dust, the haze and the totaled construction equipment...and they see the first movement of the tendrils, flapping off of the form moving in the background.

It stands on four legs, each a massive spike, like jackhammers driving into the ground with each step. Its right arm is a mass of black tendrils, wrapping around each other, each thick black strip ending in a claws and pincers, snapping at the air, drawing the last of the prone mass on the ground into it. The green armor is cracked, oozing black, silver light shining through it in jagged curves up its chest, up its neck, its jaw hanging open and glowing with red light, and wild red lights moving around beneath the v-shaped visor.

And the left arm...the left arm is black as pitch, oozing yellow and silver, cracks running its entire length. Sparks of light arc over the outstretched fingers. Tentacles run along the cracks, up the shoulders, waving out of its back...flowing out of his back.

"*He ATE the f_ing Angel! Go-kun's gone BERSERK!"*

...

The alarms blare, in the same whine and pitch as the Angel Alerts. The ground shakes, even deep in the geofront as they are, and they both look up as the tremors continue.

"That's not good," Shinji says.

Asuka nods, tapping her wrist, the orange outline of her omnitool appearing and displaying alerts.

"Oh no," she whispers, "S-Something happened to Go-kun. The seals on his left arm broke."

"What's that mean?"

"The arm was from when we were l-lost in Leliel," she explains, "It's not...um...local. And it looks like it's corrupted his Core."

He blinks, rubs the bridge of his nose, and sighs.

"I'm...going to take a guess and say that...that is the reason the ground is shaking."

"Go-kun's going berserk."

"Like I said," he says, and nods, "Okay. Asuka, you should get to Central Dogma. I think Mom's going to need your help."

She nods, clicking off her omnitool, her hands wrapped in his.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

He smiles. A faint smile at first, going wider. Lilith was right. He did feel a malaise for that long, for the time in the dream. He didn't feel like himself. He didn't feel *right,* like he knew it was all a nightmare.

"I'm going to do what I'm good at."

He pulls her close, and kisses her. As the room shakes from the tremors above, as the alarms blare and their fingers intertwine, they stand still and together in a perfect, silent moment. And as the kiss ends, he looks up.

"Rei!" he calls out, "I need to get to Ichi!"

...

They watch on the Big Screen as Unit-00 charges, knife out, Mari riding alongside its shoulder fin and projecting blasts of light and force. Tendrils along the arm catch fire, the pitch from Go-kun's ruined armor burning the metal, leaving dead pits on the ground.

Unit-00 charges, shoulder checking the giant as Mari flies back, her AT Field folding out, forming into a 8-sided diamond around her, focing her blasts into lancing strikes. The corrupted Go-kun raises his left hand, lightning crackling along the fingers.

"**FF...ff...freedom...need,**" he gurgles, "**Chance...obstruction...zero percent!**"

A blast of white slams into Unit-00's head, cracking the optics, Go-kun roaring as a blast of red and pink light burns into his shoulder, another hitting him in the chest.

"C'mon!" Mari yells, "Go down already!"

The broken Eva stomps forward, spearing the ground, dozens of red eyes moving every which way under the visor. He thrusts his right arm forward, tendrils shooting forward, pinchers and mouths on the ends snapping at her as she throws up her field. She watches them slam against it, bite and claw, letting loose another blast to burn them away, only to watch new mouths take their place.

"**Life. Right. Obstruction. Arm. Detected.**"

"He's yelling gibberish," Mari yells, "It's like someone's copypasta'ing his words!"

The Eva roars as Unit-00 stabs him with a progressive knife, deep into the chest. And Mari just watches as the tentacles wrap around the Core of the Eva and deftly shift it out of the way, before Go-kun grabs Unit-00's arms and snaps both forearms in his oversized hand.

Mari winces. She felt it, even faint as it was.

"**Zero percent! Zero Percent! Freedom is safety! Safety is life!**"

Go-kun wraps his left hand around Unit-00's head, and his hand flashes. And Unit-00's head is gone.

Mari screams, pitching forward. The AT Field disappears, the diamond disappearing, and she begins to fall, watching upside down as the mad Eva stomps towards her, extending his right hand at her, tendrils lancing towards her...

And then the Sun appears around her, burning the tentacles, and Mari looks up to see Uri cradling her.

And there is another flash of light, and they are both gone. Black pitch oozes out, burning the ground.

...

"Whatever the Eva's oozing out is corroding his armor," Maya explains, as they see the Eva point its arm downward, blasting the ground and

armor beneath, "And whatever is inside the Eva..."

"Is only being contained by Go-kun's armor," Akagi finishes, squeezing Maya on the shoulder, "The clock's ticking. What other Evas do we have?"

...

The duct falls onto the catwalk, and Shinji and Rei both land in a crouch, both clad in their plugsuits.

"Okay," Shinji says, "I was in my pajamas, and now I'm in a plugsuit. How'd that happen?"

Rei smiles, lolling back and forth on her heels.

"Trade secret."

They both stand, looking up, past the catwalk, at the silent form of the M...of Unit-01, he reminds himself. It didn't happen. That visit he and Dad did to the Core didn't happen. Ichi is still cut off from the world, scared of what he did back in Vegas.

"So," Rei says, "You think you can help her?"

"I can try," he responds, "Rei, if there's a spare Eva...I'm probably going to need some help."

Rei nods.

"Is everyone safe? I mean...down in Sheol?"

"Yep. Zyuu's in the infirmary, still. Everyone else's down there, guardin' Big Mommy."

"Good," he says, and walks to the inclined catwalk, grabbing the A-10 connectors from the tray next to the main console, "Rei, keep everyone safe. This is going to get *messy*. Okay?"

He turns around. Rei is gone, the duct cover fixed back into place. He smirks, and fixes the connectors to his head, walking up the stairs as the ground shakes and the explosions echo overhead.

"Dogma," he says, "Misato? Can you read me?"

A picture unfolds in his right eye. All of Dogma, all the staff save for his father, looking up at what he presumes is his screen, next to the Big Screen.

"*Shinji?"* Misato asks, "*Where ARE you?"*

"Getting ready to beat some sense into Go-kun," he responds, walking up to the extended entry plug, pressing the release valve and watching the hatch open, "Hope no one minds."

He climbs in, a small smile crossing his face as he dives into the LCL pool, the hatch closing as the plug pressurizes, filling with the amber liquid.

"*What?"* Misato demands, "*With what?"*

"Unit-01, really. I'm in the plug and I'm starting a manual activation."

He climbs into the chair, strapping himself in, looking up to see seams in the ceiling beginning to tear.

"*Shinji,"* Yui says, "*Go-kun's heading for Cage 3. He's heading for Unit-01! Get out of there!*"

"No," he responds, flipping switches under the seat, the plug lurching, "No, I'm not. If he wants to hurt Ichi, he's getting through me, first."

"*Shinji, don't blame yourself for what happened-*"

"Mom," he says, "All due respect. But shut up."

He takes a deep breath. A small smile, becoming wider, crosses his face. He sees the entire bridge go quiet, Misato tilting his head at him, Yui's mouth open but no sound coming out.

"Mom, I don't blame myself for Vegas," he says, "Neither should you, and I know you do. There's one person we can blame for that whole f_-up, and he's not here. We can play the blame game. We can point to ourselves for how we all got hurt and how my little sister cut herself off from the world because I lost control. But as long as we do that, we never get anything done, and we *lose everything.* So I'm not running away from this. I *will not* run away."

His hands wrap around the butterfly controls. The seams in the ceiling buckle and fail.

"And if whatever's controlling Go-kun wants to hurt my little sister or

wants to hurt any of you, *he's going to have to go through me. Synchro Start!"*

He closes his eyes, and opens his mind. Memories of the seven weeks that never happened, memories of the dream world flow out, past him and into the Core.

He opens himself to Eva. He bares his soul to her like he never has before, letting her know him deeper than anyone ever has. He lets his mind become one, lets her see. Lets her see their reconciliation. Lets her see them not as Eva and Pilot, but as Brother and Sister. Lets her see his guilt, his blame, his malaise, and cuts through it with a single message, born down from his soul to hers.

I am your big brother, and I will always protect you.

Opening his eyes, he looks up at the transparent entry plug walls, sees the black and green monster, abomination, hovering over it. The tendrils have already surrounded the neck, the jaw open and black ichor running down its teeth. Dozens of wild red eyes stare down upon it, tendrils twitching in anticipation of the meal and the power within as the creature that was once Go-kun leans forward and gurgles at Shinji.

And then

And then the A-10 connectors upon his head spark with blue light.

"**Third child recognized.**"

Shinji's eyes glow blue as a grin crosses his features.

"Synchronization at 320%. Evangelion: Mark-01."

Beneath the tentacles covering the Eva's head, two eyes glow blue.

"**ARISE.**"

Chapter 103: Will

The blue eyes light up. The gurgling abomination before the Eva rears back, startled, before restraints in the cage and carriage tear and a purple, clawed hand grabs him by the back of his head and pulls him close. Two eyes blazing like two suns, the monster roars as the Mark-01's horn is driven into his shoulder, black ichor pockmarking the metal.

"*Let's take this outside,"* Shinji growls, and the Mark-01's free hand slams into the launch controls on the wall. The carriage shudders, the catwalks attempting to retract, before the rails light up and send both Eva and monster speeding up the rails to the surface.

Neon Genesis Evangelion

Nobody Dies:

Season 5:

Gods and (not) Humans

The Bird of Light and the Giant of Will. The two inhabitants of the verdant green plane, lit under the golden sun high in the sky. Wings unfurled for both of them, one set made of light, one set covered in unblinking, crimson eyes. One stands, one floats, its light shining down upon him to no effect. Of all her siblings, he is the one whom her light cannot affect, cannot subsume, for he is Will and Truth.

"**Arael,**" Tabris says, "**You've gone too far! What you did was-**"

"*What I did was (was [was {was for the future} for us all] to bring new life) necessary."*

The green field shudders and shakes. The Giant reaches out, but she is out of reach, taking her place high in the sky.

"**Do you know what you've done?**" he roars, "**Do you know what you cost me?**"

"Yes (yes [yes {Yes}]), but it was (was [may be {was not what it seemed} for the best] as real as you made it) unfortunate."

The Overmind shudders and shakes. Tabris falls to his knees, his many eyed visage dipping down, his wings folding down around him like a great, many eyed cloak. The Bird of Light, the Light of God, lowers herself to him, her face, that what it is, hidden by the glorious presence she carries with her. So he cannot see her sympathy.

"**Why,**" Tabris asks, "**Why, Arael? What prize is worth all this? This sacrifice? What is your goal? What will you become?**"

"I will become (glorious and [the mother of {God} God] triumphant) our savior."

He looks up, his many eyes focused upon her.

"*There is power in (beauty and [creation and {control} life] wonder) all things."*

Chapter 72:

Will

The lift shoots out, the carriage stopping and sending the tentacled monster flying, flipping over before slamming into a mountain outside Tokyo-3. The restraints release, and the Mark-01 pitches forward, armor scored, horn half melted, and steps out of the carriage.

The left shoulder fin unfolds, a hand popping out, the purple and green mecha's right hand grabbing the hand and pulling out an extending Progressive short sword, flipping it in its hand and leveling its left arm at the rising tentacle monster.

"*Forward momentum's a bitch, ain't it?"* Shinji asks, the Mark-01 stretching it's neck, "*Bring it, Squidbob."*

The back armor of the corrupted Go-kun explodes with a scream, dozens of tentacles rising out, some baring eyes. Some baring fangs. Some baring long, sharp, barbed knives.

"*Hoo boi,*" Shinji says, "*I've seen enough Hentai to know where this is going."*

Four spiked legs slam into the ground, and roaring and gurgling, Go-kun charges the Mark-01.

And on a hill nearby, there is a squeal of delight as Kensuke Aida aims

his video camera. It's an Evangelion fighting a Tentacle Monster.

His life is fulfilled.

...

The opaque field flashes, blurs, and becomes transparent, revealing the white walls and ceiling of the Project E labs. Small boxes, digital information surrounding them, click on the lights, the seams in the wall, and finally focusing on the red haired face of Kyoko Zeppelin Sohryu. Her hair is frayed, fuzzy, stray hairs curling up and almost giving her a red halo around her head.

"Kirishima, do you hear me?" she asks.

"*Loud and clear, Dr. Sohryu. SUIT's systems are all responding.*"

"Excellent. We're deploying you shortly."

The view tilts. Mana realizes after a moment it is because she tilted her head.

"*Hate to ask, Doc...but in what? Jet Alone's totalled and we don't have anything, y'know, available Eva wise.*"

The floor shakes, and begins descending. She looks around, realizes that they were in the part of the Project E labs they keep the bulk lift platforms in, as floors and girders pass by.

"We've adapted it to run on the power cable. Its N2 reactor was overloaded so it had to be replaced. And the system has been set up to be flown by wire, as we don't have the room or the parts to install a cockpit. Instead, it's going to be linked to your SUIT, so you'll be up there and you'll be directing it by line of sight remote."

The girders and floors give way to a massive vehicle bay. And the screen tilts again, as Mana tilts her head. The lines of her SUIT glow blue, the seams glowing in tune with the power monitor, the circle on her chest. Her opaque faceplate turns transparent to give her a better view, as the platform clears the framework and she sees the gigantic, vented blue back fin.

"*Holy crap.*"

"Most of the damage was superficial," Kyoko explains, "The main

damage was the sniper shot the Commander delt to its CPU, so you're going to be controlling it. But since Tokita originally intended to replace you and Jet Alone with it..."

They clear the head, easily the size of an Evangelion's head, but blue and white, with cameras lain all over the plating. The mecha, more a beast than humanoid, standing stooped over on two legs with two cannon baring arms underneath it like a giant mechanical tyrannosaur, begins to move as lights flicker over it.

"We thought that the TRIDENT would be a suitable replacement while we figure out what to do with JAP's AI core."

Underneath the helmet, Mana grins.

"*Fucking metal."*

...

The doors at the back of Central Dogma open, and Pieter turns from the station on top to see a beard enter, and attached to it Gendo Ikari. He tilts his head, squints, and steps aside as Gendo stands at his desk, a white gloved hand stroking the immaculately groomed facial hair.

"What is that?" Pieter asks.

"A beard," Gendo responds, "While we were out, I apparently grew one. Excuse my tardiness, I had to look presentable."

"Go-kun's Core corruption at 87%," Maya shouts from down on the bridge, the screen shifting to the image of the corrupted Evangelion slamming the Mark-01's head into a nearby hill, "TRIDENT ready for launch!"

"What Evangelions do we have?" Gendo says, clearing his throat and walking down the stairs to the bridge, "Katsuragi, report!"

"Unit-00 has been compromised," Misato says, quickly saluting, looking up to Ikari's eyes, "Uri rescued Mari, but we can't find him. Rei's been spotted all over the base, sir."

Gendo nods. Hand still stroking his beard, he watches the battle that rages up on high. For some reason, he has deja vu. That he should be...proud...of the Eva, moreso than usual. Given, he no longer hates

her like he used to. No longer blames her for what happened to Yui, those twelve years ago.

"TRIDENT on the launch rails," Makoto reports, "Sending it up!"

"Options," Gendo says.

"Not many," Yui says, arms folded, walking back to him, "Go-kun compromised. Unless we can remove the Core and the S2 engine safely, we can either destroy him, or restrain him."

He nods. A grunt, snapping off his glasses and staring at the screen.

"Well, then," he says, "Let's see if we can..."

He slides the glasses back on.

"Tame the beast."

...

Black tendrils wrapped around its head, the mask of the Mark-01 is impassive as it is slammed into the hill, throwing up dirt, rock, pulverized trees into the air. In the entry plug, Shinji grunts. Welts appear on the side of his face, quickly healing in the LCL, before he sends a signal out and the Eva jams its arm deep into the mass, into and through the corrupted Go-kun's chest plate. Metal warps and tears, and the clawed hand of the Eva rips the chest plate off, exposing the red core and pulsing white light of the S2 engine...

And a mass of black covers it. Red eyes open over the chest, extending out into snapping tentacles, a slow, pained moan escaping the transformed provisional unit.

"**Freedom life! Directive safety! Zero percent!**"

"That's not good," Shinji mutters. Another thought sent. Pushing off its free hand, the Eva flips back, pulling free and slamming both feet against Go-kun's chest. Black blood sprays, burning the soles of the Eva's feet, before a flash of orange pushes the Mark-01 free.

"*Great! I was wondering when you'd get out of there!*"

"Mana?"

And neither are given a chance to respond, before a gout of flame from the newly risen TRIDENT consumes Go-kun as he screams.

...

"*Gee. Thanks, Mana. Now it's not an indescribable monster. Now it's an indescribable monster that's on fire! Good job.*"

"F_ you, Ikari! I'm powering up the rail guns!"

"Mind telling me why you didn't start with that?"

"Because he's a giant tentacle monster! You set that shit on fire!"

"Except that he's now on fire. Please don't make him any stronger."

"Lick my hairy balls, Shinji. I got this."

Misato winces, pinching the bridge of her nose, turning away from the big screen and the bickering portraits of Mana and Shinji, lest the stupid infect her, too. If Shinji wasn't happily involved with Asuka, she'd tease them about being newlyweds.

"Hey!" she yells, "Will you kindly stop bitching and deal with Cthulhu before he eats Tokyo-3?"

Another screen folds out.

"*He's not Cthulhu. I've fought Cthulhu and he's-*"

"Rei! Get off the God Damned channel!"

...

The Mark-01 cocks its fist back and punches. At a synchronization of 300%, the eva moves faster than Shinji's own neural firings, accessing most of its own latent abilities, drawing subconsciously on the S2 organ that rests somewhere in its solar plexus.

The fist accelerates to 1.8 times the speed of sound. The air distorts around the fist and the wrist, giving a red tint to the purple metal the fraction of a second before it hits the corrupted Go-kun in the face, snapping its head to the side.

Two and a half kilometers away, the shockwave throws Kensuke Aida off his feet.

Kilometers behind him, the skyscrapers of Tokyo-3 rumble and finally begin their descent, the automated systems catching up with reality and directing the systematic evacuation of the Fortress City in light of the newest monster attack.

The buildings grind to a halt, as another supersonic punch smashes into the monster's jaw. Grabbing fist fulls of tentacles, the Mark-01 grapples with it, just as missiles fire off from the bracing TRIDENT and into the black mass.

"Rail system's not working," Asuka says, leaning over Aoba's console, leaning on Aoi's shoulder, "M-Misato!"

"Why isn't it working?" Misato demands, turning from the screen to them, "Aoi! Hyuga! Status!"

"Rail system's rusted shut," Makoto shouts, "No one's used it for seven weeks! We'd need at least a week to get it working again!"

"We had about an hour and a half before Cthulhu fucking possessed Unit-05!" Misato shouts back, turning back to the screen, "Continue evacuations! Someone find me the Fourth Child!"

...

The catwalks close around the immobile, red and white colossus. The doors open, and her leather shoes slap against the metal as Kyoko Sohryu runs in, skidding to a stop at the main control console, on level with Zwei's chin.

"Dogma, this is Sohryu," she says.

"*Reading you, Doctor,"* Misato's voice answers via the loudspeakers, "*Where are you?"*

*"*Cage 2. I'm prepping Zwei. Is Asuka there?"

"I'm here, Mother."

"Asuka, I'm prepping Zwei for launch but I can't find Uri," she says, fingers dancing over the controls, an Entry Plug sliding off the wall behind the Eva as Zwei obediently pitches his head forward, the plate

on the back of his neck retracting and the gray green shunt ejecting into the LCL lake beneath, "I need you to come down here and pilot."

"*On my way."*

The roof above shifts and shudders. A beam of orange red light, like flame but without heat, forces its away through, forming a neat circle the diameter of a human body. It forms a pillar from ceiling to the catwalk in front of Zwei, and for reasons she cannot fathom, Kyoko does not scream.

She chalks it up to her experiences since coming to Japan. It is perhaps that she simply does not have any surprise left in her.

The light clears, and Uri stands up from his crouch, turning to her.

"Asuka, never mind," Kyoko says, "I found Uri."

She closes the channel, turning back to the computer and tapping up the commands, the catwalks giving slack around Zwei and the LCL pool draining.

"Well," he says, "I think I'm not human anymore."

"You were never fully human to begin with," Kyoko says, eyes still on the console, canceling locks on Zwei's armor, "And in all honesty you don't look any less human, though I am curious about how you can now fly."

"Mother-"

"Right now we have something definitively *not* human outside, so I think you fall into the category of human. You do not have tentacles, you still have only two eyes, but if I am right you no longer have anything to fear from Rei or her sisters making you their Special Friend."

Locks to the neck and joints disengage. Zwei's eyes light up and he leans his head forward, eager for his pilot.

"And Zwei doesn't see anything wrong with you, either," Kyoko continues, "And he's a better judge of character than anyone else here."

She looks up. He is still standing on the catwalk, hands unclenching and clenching with the creaking of the plugsuit material.

"Uri," she says, "We can discuss this later. At length, and with your sister. But for right now, *shut up and get in the giant robot."*

"Yes, Mother."

"And for what it's worth," Kyoko says, walking from behind the console, over to him and placing a hand on his shoulder, "And I hope it's worth a lot...it doesn't matter *what* you are. You're still my son."

Uri's face cracks into a small smirk, and he turns, running up the catwalk and to the Entry Plug. Walking back to the console, she hears the whirring of the Entry Plug insertion, and the groaning of musculature and metal as Uri swiftly connects with his steed. The rails behind Zwei glow, electricity crackling over them as she taps the final commands.

"Unit-02 activated," she says, "Eva Launch."

Tapping the final button, she watches as the carriage lurches and launches to the surface.

...

A new light joins the Overmind. It hovers on high, brighter than Arael, equal in magnificence to the new sun. It hovers above them as a ring of light, shimmering with each breath, shimmering with each word.

Calm yourself, Tabris. Though your losses great, what we have gained surpasses it all.

The ring hovers above them. At its center, a miniature sun burns, throbbing and pulsing with every revolution of the white chain that forms the Angel of Life.

"**Armisael?**" Tabris asks, "**What have you done?"**

I have played my part. Like you, our sister trapped me within her dream. But I have seen the goal that she envisions. Her goal is to free us from the cycle, from the terrible events that have brought us to here.

"**How? How does she plan to do that? How can she justify what she's cost me, brother?"**

A pulse of light along the ring. The red sun that was once the

cherubim Nathanael throbs.

By replacing Father. By bringing a new Progenitor to the White Egg.

...

He watches the Overmind. His own power diminished, his greater body gone, he still has a presence there. So he can watch the greater form of Tabris rage against Arael, and listens to Armisael's pronouncement. Tracing long green fingers along the words of the open book, vertical eyes running over the title of the tome.

It is human nature to seek culpability for loss, Junior says, mouth tendrils flickering, **It is strength, then, to rage against fate, rather than to bow one's head and succumb. Ultimately, Tabris may see Arael's plan not as a boon, but as a burden. And Armisael, as powerful and compassionate as he is, is still ultimately alien compared to our brother Tabris.**

A sigh. A very human expression, as the Sandalim's shoulders rise and fall.

But as much power as she displays, as much as she planned it, Arael fails to see how her plan can err. She cannot see the plans that had been laid before hers. She cannot see how she, the manipulator, has been manipulated. Pride was an alien concept to us. But pride is something we have accepted, all too well. Zeruel and Arael, opposite ends of this spectrum...

He closes the book, slides it onto the shelf next to the other religious tomes, and reaches up for a book on psychological disorders.

Both see themselves less as mechanisms, and more as gods. But infallibility is beyond our progenitors. It is also beyond them.

He turns. The black, white lines ball hovers before him, a worried trill escaping her.

So you must be prepared, too. Because in Arael's zeal to put them to sleep, she has awoken something far more ancient.

...

The tentacles lash out. Wrapping around one of the TRIDENT's legs, they turn taut and thin like razor wire, slicing through armored plate and severing the leg. He can see Mana wincing, on a hill overlooking the battle, boot and back thrusters flashing as she leaps a half mile and takes up a better position. The giant robot's thrusters fire as the remaining leg shifts to center, a wall of rockets and rail gun projectiles flying out and pockmarking the armor of the corrupted Go-kun.

If it wasn't for the fact that the power timer is stuck at 99:99:99, he wouldn't know the Eva was any different from when he first piloted. She's calling herself the Mark-01, but it's not like it was in the dream. He was faster, stronger, he could fly and teleport.

But he hasn't heard a word out of Ichi since he got into the plug.

How much of it was real, he asks himself.

"Synch's falling," Maya announces, "I'm reading decreasing core activity in Unit-01."

Turning from the TRIDENT, ignoring the glowing bullets from the machine guns and streaking rockets, the four legged Eva turns to the Mark-01 and slams its fist against the purple mecha's chest.

Restraints break. A sudden pressure pounds into Shinji's chest, bubbles in the LCL around his solar plexus and ribs as he coughs up a wad of blood, in time with the Mark-01 being tossed off its feet and onto its back.

The right arm spreads out into a wall of black and red eyes, wrapping around the Eva's neck, around the head, squeezing as the jaw of the corrupted Go-kun unhinges and red eyes lined with teeth fold out. Hissing, leaning over, the black drops of corruption streaming from its jaw, it looms over the Mark-01 as the white light pulses inside its chest...

And then a sword of flame slices through the right arm, the tentacles burning away as the Mark-01 drops to the ground. Red boots slam into the ground. In its right hand is a sword of fire, in its left hand is a shield of orange light. And Zwei roars as he charges, slamming the shield into Go-kun and driving him back.

...

Further down. Down as a relative concept, and not an absolute, down past flesh and armor and circuitry and into the red lattice and matrix that makes up the Core of the Evangelion. She has retreated once more. She has withdrawn once more. Huddled in the warmth, the beating of the core making her teeth rattle and her eyes hurt, the thing which is named Ichi Ikari throws up her walls again, wrapping misshapen arms around herself.

And in the entry plug, Shinji looks up as the walls of the plug darken, the lights turning off.

"What happened?" he asks, "Damn it! What *happened?"*

"*I'm reading lessened activity from the Core,"* Yui says, her face appearing in front of him as the screen folds out, "*Shinji, Ichi's retreated into the Core again. I guess...I guess that last attack from the...thing must have shocked her again. Your synch score's at zero. Unit-01's deactivated."*

He grinds his teeth. Past her, past the transparent plug, he can see Zwei charging the monster, the beast against Zwei's AT field formed shield as he pushes him back, and he can see the TRIDENT balanced on one leg, peppering them both with projectiles.

"I have to talk to her," he says, fixing his clips on his head, "Mom, is there any way to get me into the Core?"

"*What? Shinji, there's safeties set up to-"*

"Then disengage them," he says, "I have gone through way too much shit to let her hide in the Core again-"

"Dammit Shinji, those safeties are there for a reason-"

"I am not *arguing* with you, Mom," he yells, "Not now! I have been awake for seven weeks and I spent most of them with Ichi completely closed off from me!"

"*Wait. What? What do you mean-"*

*"*I can tell you later! Let me get into the Core and I can talk to Ichi! I did it before I can do it again!"

"*Shinji! Listen to me!"*

Yui's face blanches. Teeth grit, lips tight, she looks away for a moment, before turning back to the screen.

"*Shinji, I know you want to help. I know that. But getting yourself absorbed by the Eva could be a one way trip. It is dangerous down there, Shinji. The last time you went down there, you came out changed, and if we let you go down there again, you might not come back at all.*"

"I know that," he says, "Mom, I will tell you everything when this is over. But I know how to reach her. Mom, we both know that she loves you, and she loves us all, but there is one person she listens to *and that is me.* Disengage the safeties, let me do something stupid and dangerous, and *let me talk to my little sister.*"

Yui stares at him. The expression she has in unreadable. Somewhere between shocked for announcing the secret to the entirety of Central Dogma, and somewhere between proud for him standing up like he did.

"*Maya,*" she says, not turning to the lieutenant, "*Disengage all safeties. Good luck.*"

And there is a pulling sensation, as Shinji feels his arms and legs becoming lighter, and he feels himself being pulled down and through the seat of his plug. And the last thing he hears is Maya announcing that his synch ratio has crossed 400 percent.

...

The flaming sword severs a mass of tentacles, the black mass burning to ash before it hits the ground. The many, many eyes of the abomination flash, and Zwei brings up his shield, the AT Field formed into a physical thing flaring before the knees pump and Zwei pushes forward, through the force and forcing the creature back.

The wall of light flares, burning at the edges, flame leaking into the liquid tentacles of the god beast.

"*Uri!*" Misato says, appearing in Uri's right eye, "*We've located the source of Go-kun's infection. It's his left arm!*"

"Isn't that the one he got when everyone was lost in Leliel?"

"*Yes. We found a copy of the instruction manual Rei got, and your mother and Ritz gave a five minute speech to me about what happened.*"

"Which is?"

"Hell if I know. If you can separate the S2 engine and the Core from the body, we can destroy the body."

He nods with a sigh, and thinks the command. The sword of flame burns brighter in Zwei's right hand, and he stabs it forward, burning through tentacle and armor, restraint and flesh. He pulls back before it can burn the white pulsing light, dismissing the sword and stabbing Zwei's hand deep into the mass.

And the eyes open all over the black mass, growling and hungry drool running down the tendrils.

Zwei pulls the hand back just before the mouths close, the tips of Zwei's gauntlets snapped off as Zwei falls back.

Heel slams into the creature, pushing it back, more tentacles bursting from the Eva's back as eyes glow on their ends.

"Well. That's not good."

...

Down, further down. Through the layers of the Core, his identity a thin layer and awareness, kept to by the tensile wire of memory. Identity is kept. His self, his own light of his soul, is kept intact.

Through the wall of red he dives, into a world itself. A world of wireframe and angled, sharp mountains. A world which centers around a single point of light upon a free floating platform of black and blood.

Landing in a crouch, he looks up from the black road, stretching into infinity, the diameter of the Core itself. He can't help but think that the Core is much bigger on the inside. Or at least, it seems that way since he lacks a body right now.

Looking up, he sees the gold and red sphere at the center. Intuition tells him that Ichi is there. That the sphere is, in fact, where she hid during her time where she was catatonic. That it is her self-made prison.

"Ichi!" he yells, "I'm here!"

In responds, the ground before him shifts, rising into great claws on

the end of thin, spindly arms, flashing white steel against the black flesh as they rise over him, and dive down.

And then there's a figure of white, blurred and ethereal, which slices through them, turning to him for a moment before flashing away. He stares, watching it go, before refocusing his gaze on Ichi's prison and taking off in a run.

...

"Well, that's good. Ikari fights a metaphorical monster at the center of the Mark-01's core. I, however, have to fight a literal monster to keep it from *eating* the Mark-01."

Uri sighs, as Zwei dodges the blasts from the groups of eye tentacles.

"Story of my life."

Knees pump, and Zwei charges, holding the shield high. Another volley of missiles fly out from the stationary, mounted TRIDENT, Zwei's eyes glowing as his own AT Field cancels out the abominations, letting the munitions explode and shred the black mass along the chest.

...

"Reading heightened activity from the Unit-01 core," Maya says, fingers dancing along her keyboard, more focused on the screen of her console than the carnage on the Big Screen, "MAGI-00 has come online. It looks like the Ree are trying to get past the Core firewalls."

"Good, good," Yui says, patting Maya on the shoulder, turning and walking from the bridge and up to the raised desk, where her husband is sitting with his hands tented in front of his face, "We need to talk."

"Shinji knows," Gendo intones.

"Yes. I told him shortly before Zeruel. But he apparently knows *more*. He said he was awake for seven weeks."

"He experienced whatever the Angel did to put us in the dream," Gendo responds, "We'll have to debrief him when Unit-05 is subdued."

Yui blinks. The senior scientist for Project E finds herself, for a brief moment, completely dumbfounded and grasping for the knowledge that her husband, and intellectual subordinate, possesses.

"When?" she asks, "Gendo, Unit-05's possessed by a malignant, alien *intelligence.* What do you mean, 'when it's subdued'? We have to *destroy* him."

Beneath the hands, Gendo smiles.

...

He runs along the black path, through the tunnel of light, the white wisp severing the tendrils that strike at him. The path is spongy, soft. Becoming softer and softer to trip him, to stop him, but he does not falter, does not slow.

The gold and red orb at the center flickers and shines, the ground before him becoming mouths, teeth and eyes. The walls shift from white to red, the horizon becoming black as pitch, the ground rising to swallow him.

And then the world shakes. The horizon shatters as red eyes press against the walls of the Core, five sets of crimson, white and blue pressing against Ichi's defenses and barriers.

The white wisp passes by again. He can see the features for a moment, the red and white, framed with blue. Something human, but not. Beyond, beside human rather than pretending to be.

A memory, from the dream. His sister emerging from the plug, the blue, white and red bleeding out from her like a physical thing, leaving her human. He reaches out, touching the wisp, before it darts away, carving a path through the shadow.

"Zyuu?" he asks.

He receives no response, but continues running, the path clear to him, the monsters distracted as his sisters make their intentions known. He remembers being with them in the dream. He remembers finally being a good brother to them.

He will again.

He is *not* going to give up just because the dream collapsed, just because the world reset itself. He is tired of the malaise, tired of being on the outside looking in. The ground becomes soft and unsteady, but he continues his advance. The air becomes thick like mucus, but he continues his advance. Memories of the fight against ADAM, the god-thing's own defenses turning the air to mud and slowing light itself, and he realizes Ichi is trying the same thing to keep everyone away.

But it didn't work on him then.

"It's not going to work on me, now!" he yells, and breaks through, red eyes glowing, and brings his fist back to pound upon the golden sphere at the heart of the Mark-01's Core.

...

The grate collapses to the floor. The office of Ritsuko Akagi, outside of the cobwebs, is completely unchanged over the past seven weeks- a paragon of order, of classification and neatness in stark contrast to the piles of *stuff* that consumes her college friend's office. Eyes scan over the bookshelf up against the wall.

"*Hm...care and feeding of non-terrestrial life forms...Core Connection Procedures...So You Are Now a Ree...ah!*"

The white hand pulls out a book from the middle of the case.

"*Manual of Operations and Maintenance for Non-Standard Evangelion Arm Type PPP-1. Akagi, R. PhD."*

Flipping open the book, she scans over it, past the disclaimer where the author fondly hopes that the owner is not dreadfully incompetent and hopefully takes some care in maintenance, and over the diagrams that have mustaches drawn on them.

"*Okeydokeydoke...Security Lockdown Procedures, Pp 2-67...'kay. Explosive Lockdown Procedures, Pp 59-67."*

The pages flip. More diagrams with mustaches drawn on them. Instructions on how to catastrophically damage things.

"*Yay!"*

And manual in hand, she ascends back into the ventilation duct.

...

A part of him, deep down, realizes that this was a very badly thought-out idea. The last time he dived into an Eva's core, he ended up as a Nephilim. Well, given, he was dying when he did that and he didn't have much of a choice. But now, in a sort of disconnect to the rampaging rogue Evangelion up above- which he also realizes has a sort of poetic irony to it- he finds himself calm. Serene.

Ready.

As the final defenses fall away, and he steps into the inner sanctum. He can feel the pounding of the Core. He can feel the pounding heartbeat. It makes his ears bleed and his eyes burn, shaking him if he had a body right now. But he continues on, through the pain, through the light and the vibrations.

The world is red and dim, black etching along the walls and sky.

He can feel his sisters with him, around him, behind him. They cannot enter, but he can feel them pressing against the defenses.

Opening his eyes, he looks past the haze, walking through the world at the center of the Core, and stops.

And Shinji finally beholds his sister, for the first time. A shape, humanoid, some patches of pink amongst the chalk white, nearly featureless save for one blue eye and one red eye, patches of discoloration over her, the faint trails of wings from her shoulders and back. Shinji looks upon her, looks upon her for the first time.

Memories of the dream world. Where he and his father confronted Ichi in her own Core. Where she confessed that she was not Rei Ikari, but that his unborn sister formed the grit upon which the pearl formed.

And maybe, in the dream, there is also a grain of truth.

"Hey," he says, "I'm here."

Chapter 104: Ichi

Pale hands grip the railings, deep below the surface level of NERV's Second Branch. Kaworu Nagisa stares across the bay to the nine white figures, immobile and restrained.

During the seven week dream, he and Kei embarked upon an experiment. Using a modified version of the procedure she used to create her AIs, they created nine AIs. A perfect mix of Lilithian and Tabrim.

They called them the Nine. Each of them a six year old child, daughters, who adored their parents, who bonded with the nine Evangelion MP models. Nine perfect fusions of Tabrim and Lilim. Nine children of his and Kei.

His legacy. His victory in the Game. His *children*, more importantly. Nine girls whom he would take on play trips to the black forest, who clamored for his attention whenever he entered the VR world, who were always bright and cheerful and loving with him.

His daughters.

And now, they're gone. Sacrifices for Arael's plan which may save them all. All of them, save his children, who were simply carrots on a string to bait him along.

Kaworu Nagisa, the human half of Tabris, grinds his teeth. He is normally calm. He does not anger easily. Even the depths of Ki...of his *father's* betrayal at New Vegas did not make him truly angry. Did not cause him to actually hate the man as much as pity him, and want to care for him in his apparently dying days.

He truly hates Arael. He truly wishes to hurt her, his own sister.

And his eyes go wide as he senses something underneath. Far, far underneath. And very, very ancient. Older than him. Older than the idea of Tabris.

"Who's there?"

Chapter 74:

Ichi

Organic and metal spiked feet slam into the ground. A fault, a point of failure stressed in the armor frame from the attack of the Angel of Might, begins to give way. It starts as a crack in the ground, widening and moving along the ground, shifting the hills and the soil into the pit below. Mana reacts first, her SUIT screaming warnings and her boot jets flying, shifting her fly-by-wire control of TRIDENT to automatic as she lands on a hill nearby.

Which is when she hears the panicked, womanly scream. The fault, widening as soil, plants and debris begins to fall into the Geofront, has apparently found its first human victim. Mana can only grind her teeth when her onboard computer recognizes him as Kensuke Aida.

Kensuke, on the other hand, doesn't see Mana. Having just come to upon being knocked on his ass by the battle between the Evas and the monster, he sits up, looks over the horizon, and sees the bottomless pit opening beneath him. So, naturally, he screams. He screams as the ground gives way, flailing his hands as he sees the miles long drop and death awaiting him. His mind goes through the numbers, realizing how messy his end will be. Flailing, hands grabbing at the air, it is to his relief and surprise when he finds he is not falling.

"Heee~ey."

He looks up, to see his wrist firmly in the grip of a white clad hand. Red eyes and blue hair, and a toothy smile look down on him.

"Uh uh," Rei says, "You didn't think I'd let you die, did you?"

Another yank, and Kensuke goes flying. Part of him wonders how Rei threw him this hard without, say, yanking his arm out of his socket. But that part gives way to him screaming, squealing, and squeeing at the same time as he flies through the air, before being caught by Rei around the waist and lowered to the ground in front of Mana.

Mana looks down, at Kensuke, and then back up at Rei.

"*Okay,"* she says, "*Where the f_ have you been?"*

"Looking up stuff," Rei says, rolling her shoulders, crossing an arm over her chest and pulling it, "Hold up, gotta stretch! Soooo I'm gonna need you to kinda flank Go-kun."

"*Uh huh. You, you know, don't have an Eva, Rei."*

Rei only smiles. In the twilight, her eyes are glowing. In fact, Mana sees it, stepping back slightly. The red of Rei's irises expand, slowly filling her entire eye, turning them from simple red eyes into two blood red orbs.

"Yep," she says, "An' I don't *need* one for this."

And without another word, Rei turns and kicks off, before taking off in a leap towards the battle.

Kensuke, on the other hand, is already unconscious.

...

Asuka Langely Sohryu watches the screen. Her brother is engaged in battle with the monster. Her boyfriend has once again given up his physical body to bring his little sister out of her shell. There are no spare Evas, no spare mechas and all she can do from where in Dogma is advise, and try to keep calm.

Or at least, that was the idea.

Because she looks up as the vent above her opens, and neatly catches the manual as it drops. Holding it up, she sees two things. First, the name:

Manual of Operations and Maintenance for Non-Standard Evangelion Arm Type PPP-1. Akagi, R. PhD.

Then, she sees the note attached.

Couldn't take this outside with me, part of Dr. Akagi's collection. Switch over to my plugsuit frequency and walk me through this, 'kay? :)

-Rei.

Later, they would find the time release latch in the duct work above Central Dogma that released the book, but that is not important right now. Tapping her Omnitool, she takes out her earpiece and fits it to her ear, tapping it to activate it.

"Rei?"

"*Riii~ight here, Asuka! So, turn to pg 59 and start walking me through this!"*

...

"I...guess this makes sense," Shinji says, "I figured that if you actually had a body, deep down here, it...wouldn't be...well, it wouldn't be like I saw you, would it?"

He winces. So does she, as much as he can tell. That wasn't the right thing to say.

"That wasn't the right thing to say," he says, out loud this time, "I know. I know, and I'm sorry, I just...I guess I kind of expected this. I remember in the dream that you said you weren't *Rei Ikari,* just that she kind of...I dunno, formed your core and you built yourself around her."

Silence from the being before him. Silence from his *sister.* Because in a sense, even now, she is. Inwardly, Shinji Ikari curses himself. He had be complacent. He had been lazy. Maybe he can blame his past, how he has always been an only child, never reaching out, never being more than...*there*...for this.

"But that doesn't matter," he says, "Because you're still my *sister."*

...

Her running speed has broken seventy miles per hour. A white, blue and red blur, she races over the shifting, rumbling landscape, through the bow waves released by the blows from the two Evas, past the still and stopped TRIDENT. Lights still flicker on the giant machine, as Rei sprints past it, her red eyes glowing before she jumps.

Leaping, her feet land on a solid plate of orange light before she leaps again. Drawing her hands back, orange light flows between her palms as she flies through the air towards the monster. Already, the changes are evident. Her veins pulse white. Her fingernails turn blood red, then silver.

With a mighty shout, she thrusts her hands forward. Invisible, tangible, the projectile breaks the sound barrier. The bow wave follows it, sheering through the air, sheering through the black flesh as it severs a tentacle at the midpoint and sends it flapping, disintegrating, to the ground below.

Turning from Zwei, a half dozen of the eyes in Go-kun's mouth turn to Rei and lash out.

Just as planned.

The left arm, the source of the corruption, extends. Forming her AT Field around her, ignoring air friction and gravity itself, she angles it into a wall according to Asuka's instructions, into an impenetrable slope which causes the plasma blast, glancing as it is as she dodges, to deflect upwards as she dives in.

Twisting in the air, Rei dodges, her nails digging into the tentacles that was his right arm and drill, leaving silver gashes as she darts along it on all fours, eyes solid red and growling like an animal.

"*Rei! You're approaching the first joint! 5 meters ahead, hard right!*"

A leap, a blur, and she twists in mid air to dive. A joint rends and fails, the arm locking up as Rei leaps from the black mass, running along the shoulder, leaping as Go-kun's jaw snaps towards her.

She dives through the snapping jaws, drawing her AT Field around her balled left fist and driving it into the metal and flesh, making the Eva growl, spit, and turn its attention towards her. Leaping off the corrupted Go-kun, she turns in mid air and dives just as the lance of plasma flies past her, her own field keeping her safe but the ends of her blue hair turning white from the heat.

Landing in a crouch, she breaks into a run, looking over her shoulder to find the Eva now marching after her and towards the silent city of Tokyo-3.

...

"Nominal core activity in Unit-01," Maya sounds off, "Unit-05 has broken off from Zwei and is chasing Rei. Zwei is pursuing."

Balling her hands into fists, Yui grimaces. She hasn't said anything, but the situation itself is driving her insane. Three of her children are out there, three of them in mortal danger, and this isn't any different than any other time she's sent Ichi, Shinji and Rei to fight an Angel but she can't help but feel the nagging, biting deja vu at the pit of her gut.

Turning away from the fight as Misato barks orders to Mana and Uri, she walks from the bridge of Dogma and takes out her PDA, tapping up camera controls and entering in her own, private passcode.

The screen on her PDA changes. Eight hastily installed replacement cylinders filled with LCL, at the core of Sheol, deep within, past safeguards and defenses and every possible form of lock known. Past miles of earth, past armor layer after armor layer, and beyond the Graveyard that serves as both a reserve material hub and distraction from the real secret treasure of Sheol.

She sees five of her daughters suspended in LCL, their cores stabilized, albeit only in the LCL, as the battle wages up top. Even though there is a slim chance that Go-kun is now an Angel, and even if there's only a slim chance it could get into Sheol, they did act exactly according to their drills and got themselves to safety. Good girls.

Although, Yui wonders, looking at the screen, reassured as she is that at least *some* of her children are safe...

Why is Hatchi frowning?

...

"*Blue readings stable.*"

"EKG is erratic. What's the status of her Core?"

"I'm reading fractures but they're healing. LCL infusion in 3...2...1..."

A sudden jolt. Her eyes flutter open for a moment before closing, taking in a brief sight of the wavy, blurred light of the LCL tank. Hanging lazily in the liquid, wires attached to the red crystal sphere lodged in the base of her throat, the young woman sleeps, dreams, and recovers.

Fingers twitch in her fugue state, while Mari Illustrious Makinami *ne* Ramiel, the Angel of Thunder, the reincarnation of the Lightning of God, tries to focus. She is aware that she just woke up. She is aware that she was wounded by the monster that was once Unit-05. But she is aware of little else. She could also really use her glasses, as even the brief its of vision she gets as her body succumbs to exhaustion and recovery were blurred and liquid.

Of course, that is the problem. She tries to remember, her mind wandering. She tries to remember those seven weeks, but fails. The part of her which is Angelic cannot tell her why, as her mind retreats into the Core, to heal the body she uses to interact with the world around her.

And as she does so, a little bit more of her control slips.

Deep down, miles beneath the surface. On the same level of the Black Egg as the five Children of Lilith pool their powers to aid their Brother and their Sister, a small measure of control is restored. Not much, just a little.

But the Sister is thanked, if only as a whisper on the winds, as a small grinding of blue upon blue. It is not much, not by a long shot, as the Lilim would say, but it is a start. Angels remember the dream. Angels remember the seven weeks that the base world was under the sway of the Light of God.

And the simplest explanation for why Mari does not remember the seven weeks is one that Mari does not ever consider.

That she is not as much of an Angel as she thinks she is.

And in the gargantuan corpse that forms the centerpiece of Sheol and the Eva Graveyard, a single cell on the broken face shudders, splits, and divides, a second cell of perfect blue, reflective crystal joining its twin.

It will take time. It will take eternity for it, at this rate.

But it has forever.

...

Shinji grew up thinking he was an only child. The closest he ever had to a sibling for the first sixteen years of his life was his cousin, who moved to Germany shortly after he came to live with his aunt and uncle. So, he grew up as an only child. He grew up never knowing how to be a big brother. He grew up thinking he was alone.

And in the past few months, he has realized he was wrong. Even if his mother didn't tell him about them, they knew about him. Nine girls who knew about their big brother, who learned about him, who

idolized and loved him. Even Ichi, who pen pall'ed with him on and off over the course of his sixth year, and sent him the occasional email message as he was growing up.

All of them are his little sisters. During the dream, he finally realized what it meant to be a big brother. Even if that dream didn't happen, he's going to do so again.

He would describe Ichi, her true form, locked in the Core of the Eva. But that is besides the point. Even misshapen, even the mixture of man and Lilith that she is, it does not change who she is. He still sees her as the adorable six year old girl who was glowing when they went to her birthday party, or the teenager who confessed to him that she didn't know how to be twelve. He still sees the girl who was crying to herself when he first met her in the darkness of the Dirac.

The hedgehog dilemma. If two hedgehogs wish to become close to each other, it gives them a greater chance of being hurt by their spines. If two people become close, the chance increases that they can hurt each other. Every interaction he has had with Ichi has been through proxy. Through the Core, through the Entry Plug, through interfaces. She has kept *everyone* at a distance because she believed she would reject her.

And so it is with great surprise to her that Shinji moves forward, wraps his arms around her, and pulls her into a hug. Even for a being which is a mishmash of Lilith and Lilim, she is shorter than him. Her head comes up to his shoulder at most, her face buried in his chest. The shaking of her shoulders, the tension leaving her, and the wetness he feels on his chest only reinforces that she did *not* expect this.

"Ichi," he says, "Listen to me. You are *not* a monster. I don't know what people would say if they saw you, but you *never* have to be afraid of that from me. I don't know who Rei Ikari is, I don't know who she could have been, but what happened to her has never been your fault. I know who Ichi is, and I will never reject her just because of what she is. You're an Evangelion, you're the mind at the center of it, and you're still my little sister. You're *not* an abomination."

He smiles, faintly. A small smirk.

"That's Rei's job. She pulls it off a lot better."

A small shaking of Ichi's shoulders. A small laugh.

"I will always protect you, and I will always be there for you," he says,

"But it's a two way street. I hurt you last time, and I am sorry. But if we're going to make this work, I can't be the only one trying, okay? Because I have an idea. And we're going to save everyone, but only if you help me."

"*Okay,*" Ichi says, her first words since he entered the Core.

He smiles. This feels good. This feels *right.* He can feel the smiles of his sisters outside the core. He can feel the red of the world giving way, the cracks upon it mending. A steady thum and beat and pulse of the Core as the red gives way to the white.

"Good," he says, "Because that thing possessing Go-kun? I'd say he's asking for an ass-kicking."

...

Roaring, the monster charges, stomping into the silent city, concrete and abandoned buildings giving way to the impaling edges of the creature's legs. Growling, spitting, roaring, it follows her into Tokyo-3, dozens of eyes tracking her as she races the monster.

A leap that shatters concrete, and she ascends up a building, a thin and squat structure which some erg on the back of the monster's mind recognizes. But, berserk as it is, it charges at her, ramming into the building as she leaps off of it. Which is when the Eva-Scale incendiary grenade launcher- and the ammo inside it- explodes, the corrupted creature roaring as it once again finds itself on fire.

Thrashing about, the tentacles cleave through the remains of the building as it spots Rei landing on a nearby warehouse, stomping towards her and brings up its left arm, a lance of white blasting out and punching through the warehouse as Rei leaps, the back of her plugsuit crisping and turning black as the heat and force of the blast glances off of her.

Grunting, she lands, a pump of her knees sending her flying again, picking up speed as she wraps her AT Field around her, lancing through the air, reflecting off another building and launching herself straight into Go-kun's mass.

The creature hisses, snaps, tentacles rising from his back to shoot into his body, seeking out the intruder. Another burst, black blood spraying over the buildings and eating through them, and Rei leaps

out and lands, crouching on the building directly in front. Raising his left arm, the creature splays out his fingers, aiming...

And the blast shoots backwards, the safeguards activated as it channels the plasma bottle directly into the arm. The blast shoots out the back of the arm and shoulder, Go-kun roaring as he stumbles back, metal plating around the arm sheering off and sending black feelers, topped with eyes, waving around.

And then the air begins to warp. The sky begins to turn purple. And everything around them, from Rei, to the buildings, to the land itself, begins to glow orange. A soft light, without heat, without shadows, that permeates the city down to the shell of the Black Egg.

...

"What is that?" Ritsuko asks, "Maya?"

"Reading as an AT Field," Maya responds, tapping on her console, charts and graphs appearing on the Big Screen, "It...it just came out of nowhere! MAGI is confirming that there's an AT Field which has just...appeared out of nowhere and it's covering *everything* in Tokyo-3!"

Another alarm begins blasting, multiple screens folding out and appearing in mid air. And all of them focused on one object, one event.

"Unit-01 is re-activating!"

...

Rising, the purple giant growls. The eyes shift from white, then to yellow, a blue glow flooding the eyes and the cracks of the giant's armor. Hunched over, almost doubled over, the armor creaks and strains, the low growl of the giant becoming a high pitched hiss of escaping steam and building energy. The armor of the chest glows and warps, the cracks of Unit-01's armor glowing in time with the awakened source of limitless power deep within.

Jaw locks tear. The armor around its shoulders and back tear. With a sound that is a mix between a scream and a roar, Unit-01 rises into the air, head thrown back, arms out, a white glow suffusing it before

consuming it in a pillar of light. Despite the brightness, those who stare upon it are not blinded. Despite the power, those near it are not burnt.

Dropping the helmet of her SUIT to the ground, Mana tilts her head, staring at the pillar, watching as eight wings of white light fold out. She can almost make out a shape in the pillar. Almost see how the armor is shifting, reconfiguring, changing.

And then the pillar is gone, and there is nothing where Unit-01 stood.

And in Tokyo-3, left arm still smoldering, the creature that was Unit-05 turns from the orange suffused city and to the horizon. A pulse, and the orange glow of the city ripples. Another pulse, and it is before him. A giant, covered in white and purple armor, eight wings of light trailing behind it, blue eyes peering beneath the white, horned helm.

It would ponder what it was. It would ponder whether or not this is the same being that it fought so briefly before.

But it does not have time to, for the Mark-01 then swings its fist into Go-kun's corrupted form with enough force to send the creature flying into the air before taking off after it.

And the Mark-01's AT Fields, surrounding Tokyo-3 itself, still hold.

...

"Holy *crap,* that's why we give that girl cake!" Misato yells, "Maya! Tell me Shinji's synch score, and I'm laying bets it's *four digits!"*

Mouth opens, closes, and Maya stares at her screen as Akagi and Yui rush over. They, too, have an expression much like a puzzled dog on their faces, one which Misato does not match as, unlike them, she is not one of the head scientists of NERV. This would worry her, if she were not Misato.

"What?" she asks.

"According to this, he...his synch score is *zero,"* Maya explains, "Shinji isn't synching with the Eva at all."

"That's not possible," Ritsuko says.

"That isn't possible," Yui agrees.

Ritsuko turns to her immediate superior.

"Is it possible?"

Yui tents her fingers in front of her face, Akagi folding her arms, and on the screen it still shows the corrupted Unit-05 tumbling through the air. Leaning over to Maya, Yui taps her screen, entering in her pass code and bringing up files from the MAGI archives. A new set of data appears overhead, lines and graphs that match up with the current readings from Unit-01.

"What is that?" Ritsuko asks.

"Telemetry from when Unit-01 was in the Dirac with ADAM."

"So wait," Misato says, "Ichi's now in the same mode she was in when she *nearly killed ADAM?"*

"By my best guess, yes."

"*Awesome."*

...

Tumbling through the air, the tendrils of the monster grasp at the air as the back jets of the corroded armor fire, correcting its path, forcing it upright and stable in the air. And then there is a flash of light, and the white giant is before him once more. A swing, a blast of light, and Go-kun is send flailing upwards, the spark and trail of white wings racing it skyward.

White hands grab it by the throat, and the observers would see a streak of light racing downwards, slamming both the Mark-01 and the corrupted Evangelion into the hillsides outside Tokyo-3. White clawed hands dig into armor and black flesh, tearing off bits of armor, sending black blood and bile over the landscape. Wrapping hands around the pulsing light at the heart of the Eva, she pulls.

A sphere, white and silver, grooves in the side built for Evangelion-sized hands and a pulsing light at the center, black tendrils wrap frantically around the S2 engine as the Mark-01 pulls it from the chest. A pulse of light from the eyes of the ascended Eva and the

tendrils retreat and burn, the engine released.

"I'm pulling up the plug cameras," Maya says, "Ego border's restored. Shinji's returned to solid form."

Yui nods, hand on Maya's shoulder.

"Let's see it," she orders.

The screen flickers, static fading. The last time Shinji entered the Core, after all, he came back a Nephilim. Something went wrong, something always goes wrong when one gives themselves completely to the Eva. The static fades, and they can see, they can see the inside of the plug, the walls pulsing white in time with the fully awakened S2 organ.

And Yui smiles.

"He did it."

Turning, the Mark-01 brings its arm back and swings, sending the S2 engine flying across Tokyo-3 and into the hands of the waiting Zwei.

"*Uri! Get that to an elevator!"* Shinji yells, booming voice through the speakers of the Eva, "*And get out of here! I'll take it from here!"*

The light and flame have died down. The purple of the armor has turned white, blue and purple lines running along the grooves of the armor. Blue eyes pulse in the helm of the Evangelion, the horn on the brow restored from the corrosive blood of the monster.

The jet strips are gone, the shoulders smooth, unrestrained, formed instead into eight vents along the back that continue to pulse as the white wings fade. And the Eva is not standing. Instead, it is floating off the ground, just off the tips of its boots.

Vents open along the palms. Vents open along the chest and the back of the legs. Power pulses within them.

And the armor of the corrupted Go-kun falls to the ground at last, the last vestiges of its restraints disintegrating. The black explodes outwards, a solid explosion and pulse of poison. It forms a sphere and collapses upon itself, a thousand insectoid legs digging into the ground as a thousand eyes open, slavering as five hundred eyes open along the worm like body.

And at the center of it, pulsing in defiance, is a red sphere, trying to

pull away, but failing.

They are speaking in Shinji's ear. Telling him to destroy the Eva.

"*Okay,*" he says, almost a whisper, "*But I'm saving Go-kun, too.*"

The Mark-01 extends her right arm over her head. A line of white expands out, reality tearing and folding away, forming into a column which folds away into a weapon.

"*Synchronization requirements met. Access granted to Magoroku.*"

The Progressive Sword appears, the generators in its hilt humming to power as lines of orange dance over the Evangelion-sized katana. And swinging it back, the wings of light bursting from the Mark-01's back, the Eva charges.

...

A slice of the sword cuts through the tendrils, black muck and red flame dancing through the air, pressing against the white light surrounding the Mark-01. Pressing forward, the creature, the worm, rears itself up and brings itself down, crushing itself against the ascended Evangelion.

The white fire burns from the armor of the god machine. Pushing against it, AT Field pulsing white, the Mark-01 raises the monster into the air. A swing and a cut of the sword, and a chunk of the creature drops, burning away from the mass as the black drips off and revealing it to be a burnt, oversized left arm.

"*That's the source of the infection!"* Misato screams in his ear, as his eyes pulse in time with the white surrounding the entry plug, "*Infection levels are dropping-"*

The monster screams. He hears the name of the creature that has corrupted the Eva, the friend, the ally, and for a moment Shinji freezes upon witnessing the true name of the beast before him. And gritting his teeth, he pushes against the creature, pushing it back, the beast growing larger and larger, twice the size of his eva, three times the size of it. Slavering jaws snap, tendrils and tentacles pressing against the Eva but forced back.

Eyes align over the trunk of the beast, glowing, and they release. A

pillar of red light as big as the Evangelion itself slams into the Mark-01, Shinji and Ichi screaming in unison from the attack...

And an orange, hexagonal wall of light slices through the beam and to the ground, the monster seizing up as a red light at its center glows.

"*Shinji! Go-kun's re-establishing control! He's activated his self destruct!*"

No response is given. None is needed. The eyes of the Evangelion glow blue as red lines glow along the trunk of the corrupted worm. The armor of the Mark-01 flashes white, light surrounding it, consuming it, eight wings of light folding out of the back of the armor as it hefts up the beast and hurls it skyward.

A pump of the knees, and the Mark-01 ascends. Leaving sonic wake in its trail, she slams fists first into the black beast, sending them both flying, higher and higher. Trailing white behind them, the city shrinks below, the Evangelion carrying the glowing beast into the sky.

Past the clouds, as the sky becomes space, as the atmosphere gives way to the void, the Mark-01 releases the monster, bringing up the sword and slicing into its bulk as the entire beast glows red.

And the Big Screen flashes in time with Go-kun's detonation. They watch as the explosion ripples along the bulk, exploding outward in plasma and flame, consuming the bloated expanse of the monster and the Mark-01.

...

"Go-kun's...detonated," Maya reports, averting eyes from the Big Screen, "Recovering Zwei and Rei now...scanning for telemetry of the Mark-01 and-"

As it is, they don't have time to be worried. Before they can, before any sign that Shinji had somehow sacrificed himself to save them become apparent, the Big Screen folds out into an array of monitors and graphs, alerts blaring through Central Dogma.

And a single point of light appears on the ground outside the eastern edge of Tokyo-3. The clouds part, the ground rumbles, and the city shakes as the Mark-01 appears, sonic booms trailing it as it falls down into a crouch, arms wrapped around her torso. Unfolding them, the Mark-01 lays a red sphere on the ground, holding her hands over it, a

gentle white fire running over it as the black veins pulsing along the Core wither and die, leaving it pristine and uncracked.

And the white of the Eva's armor fades back into purple, the vents reforming into the shoulder fins, as the Eva pitches her head forward and her eyes dim once more.

...

His blonde hair is damp, freshly toweled off, and his solid orange eyes only a bit disconcerting to them, but he reminds himself that they are well versed in Rei, so hence the fact that he is not navigating by ductwork or designating people as *special friends* must be a relief to them.

"Right," Uri says, "Let's begin. What do you want to know first?"

Sitting across the table from him, cup of cooling coffee in front of her, Ritsuko Akagi taps the recorder and turns back to him.

"Let's start with the basics," she says, "Do you remember the seven weeks?"

"Yes," Uri says, "My guess is because I am now an Angel, so I was unaffected by the...dream, we can call it."

Ritsuko nods, writing on her notepad.

"As far as I can tell, only Ikari and myself remember. Why us, and not, say, Mari, the Evas, or the Ree is a mystery to me. But while Ikari is...sleeping off whatever happened to him..."

"We'll be pumping you for details, yes."

He nods.

"Where shall we begin?" Uri asks.

"The Angels that attacked."

He nods.

"Yes. Zophael, Tamriel, Cammael, and Zadkiel. They were Cherubim. Oddly weak for Cherubim, considering what Raziel did. This is what I know about them..."

...

It is a familiar ceiling. Shinji groans as he wakes, finding himself once more in the infirmary. And once more with his hands and ankles tied to the bed. He sighs, and turns his head to the side, spotting Asuka entering the infirmary room. She stops, smiles, and exits. He raises an eyebrow, finding himself more tired than he should be.

"Good. You're up."

He looks up as his mother walks in, followed by Asuka. Yui undoes the straps on his ankles, Shinji stretching his feet with audible cracks, Asuka untying his hands as he rolls his head from side to side, his body stiff and sore. He feels like he's slept for weeks. He feels stiff, like he's been lying down for days.

"Okay," Shinji says, half groaning, "What'd I come out as, this time?"

His voice sounds stronger than the first time he woke up after absorption. Maybe he's gotten used to it. And yet, Asuka and his mother are both smiling. Groaning, he reaches up, rubbing his face, rubbing the sleepiness from his eyes...

And pulls his hand away. He looks at his hand, turning it over and over, splaying his fingers out and staring at the back of his hand.

The color is different. Darker. Not as in very dark skinned, but darker than his color as a Nephilim. A normal color, a little darker than Asuka's, more in line with his father, more in line with his friends...

More in line to what he *was*.

"Mirror."

He sits up, looking up as Asuka pushes the wheeled mirror in front of him. He looks up, staring at his reflection.

Blue eyes and dark brown hair stare back at him. Looking himself over, seeing the normal shade of his legs, of his arms, he looks up to confirm that yes, his face is back to its normal skin tone, that *he* is back to his normal skin tone.

"H...how?"

"I don't know," Yui says, "But...the best guess is that...well, you did it

right this time. When Ichi reconstituted you after you two were done...she was able to put you back right, this time. Like you were before, before New Vegas."

She sighs, leaning in, pressing her lips against Shinji's forehead.

"Ichi has been emailing me nonstop," she says, "She says how she was *very* sorry for cutting us off, how brave you were for what you did, and how she will never, ever again hide from us because she wants to be brave like her big brother."

Yui cups his chin, pulling her up to face him.

"I am *very* proud of you. But, since we're still trying to figure out what happened..."

"Right," he sighs, "When do I get to give my interview?"

"Tomorrow. After school. Section 2 will take you two home. Uri's giving his statement, now."

He nods, and with a smile and another kiss on his forehead, Yui walks out, leaving the two alone. Already standing, Shinji is looking himself over in the mirror, patting himself down, finding that in addition to restoring his humanity, Ichi has apparently also given him better abs than he had before.

"Huh," he says, "When's Section 2 picking us up?"

"I t-told them to wait two hours," Asuka responds, behind him.

"Two hours?" he asks, "What if I woke up early?"

He turns around, just in time for Asuka to grab him by the front of his hospital gown and mash her lips against his own. His eyes go wide, one eyebrow lifts, and he quickly goes with the program, grabbing her by the back of her head and pulling her into a deep, breathy kiss.

...

She locked the door when she left. Yes, she reminds herself, she did read him the riot act when he and Asuka had sex before they left for Vegas, but she also...

A sigh. Yui Ikari has trouble believing her children will ever grow up.

She doesn't understand exactly why, of course. But maybe it is her own childhood, the whole mess involving her mother and Meredith. Maybe it is how little time she spends with her son, or her eight rambunctious daughters.

Maybe it was losing her daughter to Unit-01, and having that child become the core of her beloved youngest child.

But, Yui does want to baby them. And maybe, she hopes, her son and her wonderful girlfriend- who Yui trusts with far too much to discount as a typical teenager- will at least wait until they get home. But, they are adults, or quickly becoming such. And besides which, there is another child which she should, by all rights, be babying now.

Entering the isolation ward of the NERV infirmary, Yui sneaks into the room, softly padding her feet.

They recovered her from Unit-01 shortly before the dream started. Like everyone else, she didn't age a day...but instead, something else happened. Something which none of them expected. Silently walking, she sits in the chair next to the bed, as the single patient moans, opening blue eyes and spotting her, and smiling.

"Hello, Zyuu," Yui says, clasping her daughters hands with her own, "How are you feeling?"

...

And far away, in the Second Branch near Berlin, Germany.

He rages. It rages. Since the collapse of the dream world, everything that is **he**has snapped back into the cold glass and LCL waters that have become his world.

He is Zeruel. He is the Angel of Might.

He *was*.

It is the sudden, painful realization that his ascension, that his return, was all but a dream. His glory, his victory, was but a dream.

Now he is what he was and attempted to escape- a shattered husk, a remnant of something great, of something fearsome.

Slowly, realization dawns upon He Who Was Might.

He shall never have his final battle.

He shall never make those that slay his kin fear him like a God of Wrath.

He shall, forever be, diminished, and

Diminished? What is diminished?

A voice. A voice which speaks and is not is own. Turning the awareness like a spotlight upon the voice, the remnant of Zeruel ceasing his raging for a moment.

Who speaks?

I have heard you. I have been awoken by you.

Clarify. Who are you?

I am I. What is diminished?

Less than what I was. What is your designation?

I am I. You are unfamiliar. You are not [TYPE] as I am. You are of [TYPE] different.

What are you? Are you of the White Egg?

[SEED] Type? Yes. White Egg.

Who. Are. You.

The voice goes silent. For a moment, Zeruel believes it has left him. That it is a delusion of his own addled, fading mind. But it is not, for he feels the wisps of a fellow Light upon him, the bubbles of his LCL world rising as the voice becomes a choir, and he realizes what it is that has been speaking to him as the voice rises in song.

- - 0 -

...

On this Base Earth grew a tree,

A tree of Life, grown tall and free

Upon its branches in radiant white,

Grew I, and I, as is my right,

Declared my ADAM-given selfhood right,

In starlight bathed and silver light.

And spheres of platinum and cerulean eyes,

Were the body I wore as I through the sky,

Raised my majesty to heavens high.

I viewed this Base Earth from above,

To watch the stars with awe and love,

And kith and kin in wondrous awe,

Gazed and in my passing gave a roar,

"Beware! Beware! His flashing light,

Build 'pon the world's glorious night,

And please He Who is Called 'I AM's sight."

My time had passed, by purposed filled,

It was the time for my soul t'be stilled,

For Father to reclaim us sons and all,

And to return us to the White Seed's call,

When the Mother of Life did seek us four,

That the life we lead could be much more,

And so it is I have slept for ages past,

My brothers, my sisters, as time runs fast,

For now it is time for us to rise,

Like our brother, of lightning, as a great surprise,

For I am light,

And wonder,

And the starlight's

Ringing,

Tolling bell;

Angel of Constellations;

Kokabel.

Chapter 105: Human Wank

They managed to keep their clothes on until they got back to the apartment. More or less, at least. Afterwards, well. They were both tired from the day anyway, but it was...fun. To put it mildly. Now they are asleep, drifting in and out; blissful, relaxed, and content. Hands folded on his chest, Shinji feels the stiffness, the soreness leaving him like a physical thing...

And a tightness returning around his head. Feeling something come over him like a membrane, like a film. Something falling over him, making his brow knit and his teeth grit.

And Shinji Ikari opens his eyes to stare into a white light shining over him. It wavers, it focuses, and Shinji's eyes go wide as the baleful voice screams.

"*IT WAS ALL A DREAM!"*

Shinji sits up, and glances at the mirror. Blue hair, pale skin. Screaming, he jumps out of bed, races across the apartment, and bolts out the door, screaming a warning to Tokyo-3.

Without pants.

Sipping her canned coffee, Misato turns off the flashlight and pads out of the bedroom, Asuka following as she ties a robe around herself.

"Th-that was mean," Asuka says, still snickering.

The door to the apartment opens. Clad in his boxers and t-shirt, holding the blue wig in his hand and running a hand over his face, wiping off the white grease paint, Shinji glares with pure, deadly annoyance at his flatmate.

Misato sips her canned coffee.

"What kind of guardian *are you?"* he growls.

"The kind who was kept up last night by you two spooning," Misato responds, mid sip, "Kitchen, now. We're gonna lay down ground rules if you two are going to keep doing the humptity hump hump under my roof. Then you're going to school."

Chapter somethingsomething(Somewhere like 74 or such):

Human Wank

The inherent problem was that Misato had no car. It was a combination of factors; The abuse Misato put it through, it occasionally being driven by Rei, and it being crashed into a Zerulim during Zeruel's attack on Tokyo-3 by the young man whom Misato now referred to as 'Evaf_er' were the main reasons, but in the end the car was totaled. So, stepping out of the subway stop, Shinji and Asuka, hands wrapped around each others, walk into the apartment building where his parents live.

"I wonder if Mom and Dad are home," he says.

She shrugs, leaning against him, Shinji releasing her hand and wrapping an arm around her.

"Y-you're a lot more affectionate."

"I had seven weeks to be a dick," he says, "I didn't like it."

"G-good to see you're making the most of your second chance."

She moves in closer to him. He doesn't hesitate, his arms wrapping around her waist as she smiles. The elevator dings, opening onto his parents floor. Looking around, finding the hallway oddly familiar, he reminds himself that he's been here *outside* of the dream. Of course, in the dream the entire floor below him was occupied by the Ree. And hew as living here as Tamiel destroyed Misato's apartment.

Shaking his head as he walks down the hall with Asuka, he asks himself if that was what he wanted. Yes, he was living with his parents, but not with Asuka. It would seem to be a hangup or quandary. Spend time with his family or girlfriend. Perhaps that is what being a teenager is like. Outside of the giant robot sister.

Asuka rings the buzzer next to the door, and it opens. And they both freeze.

Shinji looks down.

The particularly large cat looks back up. It more resembles a ginger lion than a cat, or probably closer to a tyrannosaur than a cat. Standing on all fours, swaying the ridiculously large bushy tail behind

him, the black and tan Coon cat stares at Shinji with disdain, hate, and other aspects that fill out it being a cat.

"Merrill?" Shinji asks.

The cat mews in response, a long cracked sound which seems to begin down in its black, oozing soul. Walking out, past them, they watch as the stocky cat at least Pen Pen's size walks into the elevator. A leap, and the cat is on the rail, hitting a button on the wall and riding the elevator down.

"I d-didn't know your mother had a cat," Asuka says.

Shinji shudders. He was really hoping that was part of the dream.

"It's a long story," he moans, and turns to the apartment, "Rei! We're here!"

They walk in. The apartment is apparently empty, but much like Shinji semi remembers it from the mass mind whammy.

Scratching his head, Shinji turns to Asuka as she sits on the couch.

"So, if she isn't here, should we go to sch-"

"Heee~ey."

Shinji jumps, and turns. Standing in front of him, clad in a towel, Rei grins, lolling back and forth on her heels.

"Wish you wouldn't do that," he sighs.

"You're fun when you're frightened," Rei says, grinning from ear to ear, "An' since I helped you blow up my Eva, I need a hobby."

Shinji nods, sighing.

"How is Go-kun?"

"Fine," Rei responds, "He's talkin' and everything, and he's happy he didn't haveta die, and so are we. We're tryin' to figure out his new body, so it's all good."

"Good to hear," Asuka says, taking her PDA out of her bad, "R-Rei, we need to get going to school."

Rei nods, turns, and Shinji and Asuka both tilt their heads as they see

Rei's back. Bandages cover most of it, but they can see the black, cracked mess, the edges of it ending over her shoulders, the bottom of it covered by the towel.

"Rei..." he starts.

"Oh, don't worry," Rei says, "I got a kinda glancing blast from Go-kun's plasma cannon when he was all '**Strike Freedom Infinite Justice Wharblegarble!**' on us. Kinda melted some of my plugsuit."

Asuka turns green, looking away.

"Aaaanyway it was worse yesterday," Rei says, turning back to face them and backing towards her room, "And it'll be healed soon! Really sucky part was how my plugsuit melted into it!"

She kicks her door open with a back kick.

"Be right back!"

And she hops into her room.

...

"So," Ritsuko says, "One day after Zeruel was killed, Arael puts us to sleep. Let's arrange the timeline. Apparently, in this dream world, Shinji somehow puts out an AT Field...which..."

"Somehow attracts women," Yui says, sitting in her chair in her office, tossing the baseball up and catching it on the return, sneakers up on her desk, "And then Asuka gets into a fist fight with the entire female population of the school, then the Ree over the privilege of having sex with Shinji again-"

"Which she doesn't."

"Which is the first sign it's a dream, honestly," Yui says with a shrug, "Because Shinji has tried to keep their relationship slow."

Akagi shrugs.

"He shows signs he doesn't want to be seen as taking advantage of her," Ritsuko says, "Honestly, it took direct exposure to Lilith to get them to have sex. That's more willpower than most of us have."

Yui grumbles.

"Moving on," Ritsuko says, "Shortly after that, Lilith splits off a jouten, the Ree stabilize, and things go to Hell."

Yui nods, tossing up the baseball as the door to her office opens and Misato walks in. The two exchange a glance, Misato's hands on her hips as Yui rolls the ball between her hands.

"Makes sense," Akagi says, "If Arael was affecting us and the Angels, Lilith personally entering the dream must have strained it. Like..."

"'Yo humanity, yo Momma's so fat that when she enters the dream world, she snaps the suspenders of disbelief'?"

"Yes, Misato," Akagi responds with a smirk, "Exactly. The dream membrane was fragile, then Lilith starts using it like a *fucking trampoline*."

A phone rings. They glance at each other, and Misato pulls her phone out, staring at the number and flipping it open.

"Yeah, where the fuck are you?" she asks, "No, I'm not going to say, 'Hi Kaji,' because we just had the most messed up day *ever*. So, want to tell me what corner of NERV you're hiding in so I can go down there and feed you to the Ree?"

A pause. She tilts her head, waits a moment, and puts to words her thoughts in that moment.

"Kaji, what the *fuck* are you doing in Berlin?"

...

It took hours to fumigate the classroom after seven weeks of no use. Spiders, insects, cockroaches, cobwebs. All had taken up residence in the classroom, and as the pile of dead insects near a partially chewed power cable attested, they were not in stasis like the mammals and birds were.

Still, NERV does good work. The room is clean as the lights turn on, and Hikari Horaki enters the room, putting her book bag on her chair and smoothing out her plaid skirt, fixing her ponytail and walking to the board.

"Hi, Hikari!"

She glances to the side, to the classroom door, and smiles as the other girls enter.

"Hi, Sasoriko," she says, "Kiri, Emi. How're you?"

The three girls, long time friends of the seemingly permanent class representative for Class 4A, walk up to her, closing the door behidn them and a dark, jumpy expression coming over the face of the black haired Sasoriko.

Oh good, Hikari thinks, *Sasoriko's got a conspiracy theory. I could use this for my Shadowrun game.*

"Hikari," she says, "Does anyone at NERV know what...happened?"

"Happened?"

"You know," she responds, "Your mom works in the PR department. Does she know what happened? What's NERV telling her?"

Hikari sighs. Her mother, Yurika Horaki, does work at NERV, in Section 4- the Public Relations department, as one of the many spokespeople for NERV-1. Which means that she usually gets attention when someone wants to know what *really* happens.

"And your mother works at Project E," Hikari responds, "She'd have a better idea than my Mom would know."

"Mom wouldn't say anything if she knew," Sasoriko says, as Emi rolls her eyes, "And your mother has to help put the spin on things. Something weird happened for seven weeks and we don't remember, so NERV would have to know what caused it, wouldn't they?"

Inwardly, Hikari takes notes. This may actually be better for her Exalted campaign.

"It's probably the weirdest thing that's happened so far," Emi observes.

"No, not the weirdest possible thing," Sasoriko responds, "Think about it. It could always be weirder. We're talking about a conspiracy rich superorganization that's run by scientists. We could find out we all have clones. Or that the Angels are actually us from an alternate future. Or we could all spontaneously lose the ability to see the color orange. Or that-"

"*Heee~ey.*"

"Rei could show up," Hikari responds, "Hi, Rei."

The girls, save for Hikari and Kiri, jump as Rei smiles, turning to her and to Shinji and Asuka, still in the doorway.

"Why have I gotten used to that?" Shinji asks.

"B-because you're her brother?" Asuka observes.

They watch as the mousy girl, Kiri, begins fussing over Rei, seeing the discoloration on her neck from the plasma blast, as Hikari drags Sasoriko over to them.

"Hey, you're just the people we were looking for," Hikari says, "Shinji, your mom runs Project E. So does Asuka's. Sasoriko here was curious about what the *Hell* happened."

...

"Okay. No. Not her."

The venue has changed. Following Yui's conversation with Kaji- which was not helped when Kaji put on a four year old girl who was apparently her grand daughter, which made her wonder *what the Hell* Kei was getting up to in Berlin- they relocated to the briefing theatre several levels up. Because the time had come to correct several mistakes that NERV had made over the past few months.

Among others, the mistake of putting all their eggs in one basket.

Arranged in front of them are sixteen photos. The other students in Class 4A, classmates to Shinji, Asuka, Rei, Mana, and Uri. In all of them pilot candidates.

Two photos have been moved off to the side, blue check marks on the pictures, having been met by the approval of all three heads of Project E and the Tactical Ops commander.

"Why not?" Ritsuko asks, "Yui, Sasoriko Yochi is intelligent, thinks on her feet, and has an above average synchronization score."

"Ritsuko, she thinks that NERV is part of a secret conspiracy which rules the world."

"But we *are*."

The lead of Project E grumbles, mutters some angrish, and pinches the bridge of her nose.

"Do we *really* want a Pilot to think that?"

Ritsuko shrugs.

"You're just upset that a sixteen year old figured it out," she responds, and shuffles the photo away, "Well, true. Besides which, she's showed interest in Uri, which could lead to friction with Mari and Mana."

The redhead snatches up the picture, flipping it over and reading the profile.

"Oh, right. Yochi," Kyoko says, "I co-authored some papers with her mother. She works in the HE Physics department. Do all of these students have parents who work here?"

Yui nods, leaning forward on her chair, elbows on the table.

"Pretty much," she says, "Besides Tokyo-3 being the world's largest company town, we hold tests at the school every month. Among other things, we test for factors which allow synchronization. We haven't had to really dip into the pool, what with our pilots either being nephilim, our own children, or NHIS. But, considering the problem we had with the last two attacks due to us not being able to find the sole pilots for the Evas..."

"Hence NERV makes a well reasoned, careful decision," Kyoko responds, adjusting her glasses, "I could get used to that. So those two," she points to the two checked photos, "Are a lock?"

"Higher than average score, gets along well with the pilots, yeah."

Kyoko nods. She points to one of the approved photos, the girl.

"We're definitely going with her. I thought she had an interest in Ikari."

"Which passed. She helped set up Shinji and Asuka. Also, involved with someone else."

"Good for her. Hate for us to have to explain why Ayanami mauled her," Kyoko responds, and turns back to the To Be Decided pile, "Him?"

"Class prankster," Yui responds, "Rei finds him annoying. *Rei.*"

"True enough," Akagi responds, "Hm...how about him?"

"Obsessive gamer," Misato responds, "Think Aida, but less talent."

"What about Aida, then?" Kyoko asks, "He has potential, he's been exposed to the Ree, and he seems enthusiastic about the opportunity to at least see an Evangelion."

Yui, Ritsuko, and Misato suck their teeth.

"Dropping it, then," Kyoko responds, "Her?"

"Terrified of Rei. She's made an example out of her when she hit on Shinji and insulted Asuka."

Kyoko nods.

"And her?"

The three other women look down on the picture. Yui cocks an eyebrow.

"She knows Rei," Yui says, "And she isn't bothered by her. She's been exposed to the Ree, too, and hasn't had any outward psychological effects."

"Makes sense," Misato says, "Rei'd be happy to see her, and having someone normal in this place might help."

"I approve," Akagi says, "That's three new Children, then. Let's make the call."

...

Shinji Ikari unzips his bookbag, reaches in for his pencil case, and his hand keeps going. And going. And going. And going. And going, until he reaches in all the way to his shoulder. Which is odd, as his bag is a normal backpack, and not designed to accommodate the entire outstretched arm of a sixteen year old boy.

"Oh crap," he mutters, and pulls out of the bag. The blackness of the bag shifts, wraps around itself, and rises in the form of a black sphere.

:D!

"Lilly!" Shinji says through clenched teeth, "What are you *doing here?"*

:P.

The Leleilim bobs up and down, and floats away, past Asuka, past Shinji, and towards a gaggle of girls snarking in the corner of the room.

"Huh. So, what, is she in our class, now?"

Shinji looks up. Mana, clad in her school uniform, overstuffed knapsack held with one arm, watches the ball float away, and turns back to them.

"Just me, or is the teacher late?"

"That's because he quit."

As if summoned by mention of academia, Hikari appears behind Mana. Perhaps, Shinji wonders, she has taken lessons from Rei in the past. Reiness seems to infect people by osmosis. He's pretty sure he heard stories of Subcommander Fuyutsuki and air ducts, and he used to baby sit her.

"After everyone woke up, he quit, grabbed his pension, and left Tokyo-3," Hikari says, "I talked with the Principal. They're trying to find a new teacher."

"That's awful," Shinji drawls.

Hikari nods towards Lilly, floating towards the clique of girls on the other side of the room.

"What's that?"

"NERV tech," Asuka quickly answers.

The red head winces. She hears a comment directed towards her from one of the girls. *Gaijin.* She seethes at that, and turns back to her computer, and the project she has been working on with her mother. And then there's the scream.

They turn, just in time to see the pale hand reach through Lilly and drag the offending girl into the tear in space.

"Oh God," Shinji whispers, "Rei's tamed Lilly."

Mana sips her canned coffee, and pops a handful of raisins into her mouth.

"Jesus Christ," she says, "How horrifying."

...

Leather shoes pad along the metal floor of the NERV infirmary. He's put off doing this long enough. Straightening his collar, clearing his throat, Pieter Langely, Subdirector of NERV-1, taps the open button on the door, looks up, and smiles to greet his daughter. Smiling back, with her, are around ten floating pink diamonds, which turn to face him.

Despite none of them having faces.

Fingers tap the button again, and the door closes.

"The *Hell?"*

Shaking his head, he taps the door button again, staring at the array of crystals floating in the room, looking past them and to his daughter.

"Mari...uh...what are these?"

"I think I split them off when I get hurt," Mari says, closing her textbook and placing it back on her stand, next to the bed she is lying in, "They're my -ims. I call them Marielims."

He nods, watching one of them fly past him...and bump into a wall.

"They're not intelligent or anything," Mari says, knitting her brow, "They're like...I dunno, like remote control helicopters. I can control them mentally, but it's a bit confusing. So I'm still learning as I go."

He pulls a chair over, sitting at her bedside. He adopts the Pose. The Pose he takes when he needs to Talk about Serious Business. Leaning forward, hands folded in his lap, his ever present smile faded to a thin line.

"Dad, what's wrong?"

"You remember Director Hertz," he asks, "Back at Berlin? You know,

my boss back at the Second Branch?"

"Yeah," she says, leaning back, "I remember you kept cleaning up his messes. The running gag was that you were actually running the Second Branch, but you just worked cheaper."

He smirks, chuckles. The smirk fades.

"Well," he says, and sighs, shoulder rising and falling, "Well, he's dead. He had a heart attack right when the whole dream began. When they found him, he was...well."

She nods. She never liked him, but still. She nods, her smile disappearing, hands folded in her lap as the crystals tilt forward.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she says, "So...um...who told you?"

"Professor Ikari," he responds, "He...well, he's running the Second Branch right now. Or at least, for the next couple of days."

He slaps his knees.

"Because...well, I have to go back to Germany," he says, "I'm being promoted to Director of NERV-2."

...

Two of the clique girls, once gotten over the horror of seeing one of them remotely snatched by Rei, quickly came to a conclusion about the new, portable, Hand of Rei.

"Omigod! She's so *cuuuute!*"

:3.

Shinji isn't sure if Lilly is considered cute *despite* or *because* she is the newest Ayanami Attack Vector. Lilly has sprouted fur for the girls to pet, and he comes to the conclusion that if they say something bad about Asuka, who is currently at the nurse's office talking with Misato for some reason, they will find out that layer of fur is actually a *layer of bees.*

"She's so fluffy I could *die!*"

;3!

Shinji watches in feigned disinterest, waiting for the other shoe to drop. However, they seem to be well behaved with the sentient wormhole, and he turns to the entrance to the class, where he sees Hikari talking with the Principal.

Well, good to see he's still there. No lasting misunderstandings of Rei blackmailing people for the school dance.

The principal leaves, and Shinji leans back as he watches Hikari make a beeline towards him. In the months that he's known the girl, he's figured out the major facet of her personality.

That she's obvious in everything she does. She is obvious as the classroom rep, obvious as the caring friend, and at least in the dream world and from his earlier days in Tokyo-3, obvious when she's flirting with someone. Which may explain her and Touji, as she would require someone absolutely clueless to be her boyfriend.

"What's up?" he asks.

"NERV's vetting a new teacher," Hikari says, smiling, "He'll be here tomorrow."

He nods.

"I see you're smiling," he says, "About the teacher?"

"No," she says, and clears her throat, "The Principal just told me we're having Student Council elections earlier this year because of the crisis. I'm running for president!"

He nods, again.

"Of...the class?"

"No," she says, again, and claps her hands to squeal, in obvious delight, "Of the school!"

"Crap!"

Unassuming, unobstructive, and unnoticed, Touji Suzuhara was on time today. Of course, while he tends to wear his track suit to class, tends to sleep during the more boring lectures, and tends to keep to himself, he is in a class with Rei, Kensuke, and several Evangelion pilots. Hence, he tends to fall into the background.

Now, however, he is staring wide eyed and with horror at his book

bag, reaching in as something mewls inside of it as Hikari turns. He walks over with the bag, placing it on the empty chair next to Shinji, and reaches in.

And pulls out a white and ginger cat.

Hikari claps her hands together and squeals, identifying that it is, indeed, a Kitty.

The cat mewls in response, eyes closed and head tilted.

Shinji takes a sip of his canned coffee.

"Sophie, how'd you get in my bag?"

And then promptly sprays over his desk.

...

The clamps lock, melded with the gray and brown flesh. Tightening over the red sphere, the frame retracts into the chest as the armor locks in place over the orange and white giant's chest.

"Unit-00 has responded," Maya announces, "JA-Tan is sending response signals. She is now inside Unit-00."

Behind Maya, Kyoko sips her coffee mug and watches the operation, stepping back to Ritsuko as the technicians monitor the progress.

"If I could ask," Kyoko says, "Why JA-Tan and not Go-ku...Unit-05's AI? We are giving this one to Ayanami as her personal war chariot, aren't we?"

"According to Uri, Mana and JA-Tan were having compatibility issues in the Dream world," Akagi responds, sipping her own coffee, "And they were showing signs of it before we were all put under. So we're going to reinforce and upgrade the TRIDENT for Mana while we're stress testing Go-kun."

Kyoko nods.

"Ah, yes. The whole 'you were turned into something *more* Eldritch than usual' incident. Good idea. Hate for us to put another untested, possibly insane AI in charge."

Ritsuko nods.

"Yes, we're still trying to find Naok00 in the MAGI," she says, "But not to put her in charge of the MAGI. I was thinking...firewall?"

"With fire. And bleeding through the gums sarcasm. Yes."

Ritsuko sips her coffee again.

"Sorry," she says, "You're going to have to work harder if you want to be a bigger bitch than my mother."

Kyoko snorts.

"Give me time. Can you handle things from here?"

Ritsuko nods, and Kyoko turns on her heel to exit. Exiting the Prinbow box, she walks down the hallway, into the elevator, and taps the button for her office floor. She has paperwork to do, and the entire planet putting them in a fugue state for seven weeks does not lessen such things.

The lift rises, floor numbers ticking past. It stops, on a floor which Kyoko, still buzzing from caffeine and a lack of sleep, notices is not her own. The door opens, and Pieter walks in, standing next to her.

"You heard."

"I did," she responds, "When do you leave for Berlin?"

"In a few days," he responds, shifting from side to side, "You're not upset?"

She nods.

"Relieved," she says, "A little disappointed. But, that's life."

He nods, wrapping a hand around one of hers.

"While you're in Berlin, if you touch Makinami I will cut you."

The lift stops again. Their hands disengage, and Uri steps in, standing next to his mother.

"So," Pieter says, "I was thinking of not going back to Berlin alone."

She nods.

"Mari is still recovering," Kyoko observes, "She can't travel, yet."

He nods. He shifts from side to side, hands in his pockets, as both Kyoko and Uri stare at him.

"I was thinking of asking Asuka if she wanted to visit Berlin," he says, and quickly backs up, hands up in supplication, "Just for a couple of weeks. Maybe meet some of my friends and some of the people at the Second Branch. Because I haven't spent a lot of time with her and I thought it would be a good idea."

Kyoko stares at him. Uri sighs, shakes his head, and turns back to the elevator doors. He knows better than to get involved.

"And?"

"And it's a sort of 'kill the hypotenuse' thing," Pieter continues, "Yui's getting pissed off because Shinji and Asuka are...you know...so I can help defuse things like this. Asuka spends a couple of weeks with me in Berlin-"

"And they go back to...things...when she gets back," Kyoko says, rolling her eyes, "And you *used it wrong.* It's *murder* the hypotenuse, which means eliminating romantic competition by *killing the rival,* and in this case it's also wrong as *no one is stupid enough to get between the two*, on account of *Ayanami.*"

"Yep!"

Uri screams, jumping back, as Rei hangs from her toes from the elevator vent.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" Kyoko asks.

"Kinda sorta," Rei responds, lolling back and forth, swinging from the vent, "But I wanted to check on Zyuu and check out my new Eva. So, what'cha talkin' about?"

...

Sighing, closing the door to her office, Yui begins the long walk to the elevator, opening it to find it already occupied by another. Smiling to Misato, she enters, leaning against the back wall.

"What floor?" Misato asks.

"I was going to go visit Zyuu," she says, "But that can wait. Where are you heading?"

"TRIDENT bay," Misato says, "Just found out from Ritz that we hired a consultant for maintaining it, since no one here's actually worked on the TRIDENT project before."

Yui nods. She knits her brow, a feeling...not of dread...more like annoyance, coming over her. She shakes her head, folding her arms, as the floors tick down. She has a hint on who the consultant is. She doesn't like it, but she has a good, strong hint.

The doors open. Following Katsuragi, they enter the massive, converted vehicle bay, unlike the Cages that Jet Alone was kept in, alongside the other Evangelions. Teams of engineers are fitting a new leg to the TRIDENT supermech, while someone shouts out orders via bullhorn. Someone they recognize.

Black suit traded in for a beige jumpsuit, gloved hands covered in grease, his black hair is a mess and his glasses are traded for goggles.

But they both recognize him, well enough, from the smug grin on his weasel like face.

"Dr. Ikari! Colonel Katsuragi! Great for you to join us!"

Shiro Tokita grins, lowering the horn and turning to them, looking down upon them on high from the catwalk.

Which is the main reason Misato does not slug him.

...

The apparent exodus of teachers meant that the main event of that day was the announcement of student council president candidates. Koizuma Kaname, a square jawed boy in class 4C, captain of the Lacrosse team, also announced his candidacy. Handsome, tall, square jawed, he was a natural to run. And for freckled, nerdy, female Hikari, he was the natural enemy.

Shinji would give it time. He would not want to know the details, but he knew they would involve Rei. And a 16-17 year old sports player crying like a stuck pig in some way, shape, or form. Because to Hikari, this is Serious Business, and Serious Business does contain the letters

for Rei.

Stepping out of the elevator for his floor, he looks up, down the hallway, and finds his mother waiting for him.

"Mom?" he asks.

"Shinji," she says, "We need to go."

He looks from side to side. No pale, red eyed girls. He may be safe. But he shouldn't think that, as he is safe with them.

"Okay," he says, "Um...what? What's wrong?"

Yui sighs.

"Shinji, something's wrong with Zyuu," she says, "It's...complicated. I can explain everything on the way. But I've read the debriefing from Uri, and we need to go to Okayama to see if there's anything from Naoko there. At your Aunt and Uncle's house."

Shinji blinks. He does remember somethings rather acutely. He remembers from the Dream, at least in the Dream, that his mother drives in a way that makes Rei look sane and composed. Shifting from side to side, he notices she is blocking the path to the apartment. So he will have to take alternate routes.

"Okay," he says, quickly, "Um but I just remembered I left the oven on back at school!"

And he turns, drops his bag, and runs. Yui sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

"Rei, please retrieve your brother."

"Kay," comes the response from the vent next to her. And two hundred yards away, on the other side of the open balcony hallway of the apartment complex, Shinji screams as he's dragged into a floor level ventilation duct.

Yui would normally be worried about how Rei could talk to her from where she is, and yet still grab Shinji. But, as with many things involving her daughter and translocation, she shuts that out, grabs Shinji's bag, and walks to the elevator.

Chapter 106: Situational Awareness

The Super-Secret Ultra Special Secure Diary of Princess Ichi Rei Meredith Ikari.

Dear Diary,

I have been having a great week. It's been two days since my big brother saved the world by breaking the dream that Miss Arael put us all under. My big brother and I weren't getting along, and I was kind of mad at him, but we made up and we get along much better now! We saved Mr. Go-kun, my sister's friend, and I've been helping NERV rebuild by letting them connect the generators to my shiny new organ so the base has enough power for everything.

I'm really worried about Zyuu. Zyuu was really sick, and Aunt Kyoko yelled at me until I stopped feeling sorry for myself and saved her. Zyuu's better, but Mommy says she's been really sad 'cause something's changed in her.

I really hope it wasn't my fault. I'd be really sad if I hurt Zyuu, 'cause she's always been really nice to me.

Mommy and my big brother have to go to Okayama now to visit my Auntie Alicia and Uncle Tomoe and Miss Annette, my cousin, to see if Aunt Naoko had anything which could be used to help her.

I really hope they find something. My new sister's been telling me that they might, but she's not sure either.

But they're not supposed to know about her, yet. So we should keep that a secret.

XXOOXXOO

-Ichi

Chapter 75:

Situational Awareness

"Okay, Ritsuko. Send it to my PDA."

The screen on Yui Ikari, PhD's PDA starts up with a flash, the bar in the top indicating the video download as she stares at the screen. Folding out, the window of the PDA's dedicated video player starts up, showing the shakeycam footage just recovered by NERV from a whaling boat off the coast of Japan, circa 2015.

The boat comes closer to the creature it has been tracking, camera focused on the head of the white sperm whale as it breaks the surface of the water, coming closer and closer to the shape latched onto the face of the beast of yore, and...

"What."

Sitting next to her, Shinji tilts his head, staring at the screen. Or, more to the point, the actions taking place upon the screen in question.

"Well, that covers...ah, 4:20-5:20," Yui says, tapping the video, "Ah, yes. Definitely. This is one hour."

She fast forwards, the stabbing motion of the teenager mounted upon the head of the beast taking a comical, frantic motion.

"Is...is that Rei?" Shinji asks, blinking, "What is she doing?"

"Stabbing an albino sperm whale in the head with a peg leg," Yui responds, closing the video, "I imagine she wanted to reenact Moby Dick 'The Awesome Way,' or something along those lines. And I have no idea who's peg leg that is, and I don't want to know, either."

She leans back in the seat, the nature outside of Tokyo-3 passing outside the window at bullet train speeds, the rest of the train car bustling.

"Mom," Shinji asks, "What was that?"

"Rei's fourteenth birthday."

"...right. Why was Rei stabbing a whale in the face on her fourteenth birthday?"

...

"I love you."

Ritsuko sighs, checking off her PDA. Standing next to her is Misato,

jaw open, shoulders slumped, hanging forward in a stance more suited for a curious gorilla than a Lieutenant Colonel of NERV. And behind them is the sign, identifying where they are- the vehicle garage.

Where they have just met Misato's new car.

"You said that in college," Ritsuko says.

"I didn't mean it then," Misato says, "I was drunk, and you were easy. I mean it now. I *love* you. Was this your idea?"

The car. The Car. As something this magnificent requires capitalization. It is alpine blue, long, and hugging the ground. It is longer than her Renault, sleeker, a black racing stripe running the low side and black lines running the joints, the seams, and the roof which folds back at the click of the remote in Ritsuko's hands, revealing the four seat cab.

"Ohmygodit'saspecialorder," Misato squeals, hands clapped together, "Those are leather seats."

The entire car seems to hum. It is sleek. And curvy. The undercarriage lights glow blue, the four lights on the hood flashing on and the two fog lights on the front bumper illuminating the garage. The back tail pipe in a circle, four pipes mounted at the center of the back like a jet engine.

"Remote starter?" Misato asks.

Ritsuko clicks the remote again. The entire car vibrates, and the engine *purrs*, revving up with the power of a jet engine. Misato claps her hands together and squeals.

"NERV thought a new car was in order," Ritsuko says, "I suggested contacting Pagani to see if they could special-order a Zonda. They seem to have had a spare."

Off-handedly, Ritsuko tosses the keys. Breaking into a run, Misato grabs them in mid air, vaulting over the drivers side door and gunning the engine. Tires squeal, exhaust blasts out the back like a jet engine, and the car takes off, down the motorway of the vehicle garage, and towards the NERV test track.

...

The door slides open.

"Heee~ey. Anyone home?"

Rei skips in, kicking off her shoes at the entrance, somehow getting them both into the show closet by the front door.

"Um...Yui's going to Okayama and the Commander's still at NERV," Asuka says, pulling off her shoes and placing them in the closet, "Rei, w-who did you expect to be here?"

"Oh, sometimes my sisters come'n visit," Rei says, "Sometimes Merrill the Murder Kitteh. Sometimes the *thing* in my closet gets out, and I have to kill it again. You know. *Stuff*."

Asuka blinks. That implies the dead Angel Rei stuffed into her closet sometimes reanimates. Asuka is unsure of whether or not that is ethical.

She is also unsure as to whether or not Rei cares.

"So, anyway," Rei says, dropping her book bag on the left couch of the L-shaped configuration at the center of the living room, "I figure since Uri's busy debriefing everyone, that means we don't have synch tests, so I asked Little Mommy and we got the afternoon off."

Tossing aside the jacket of her school uniform, she grabs a controller from the green and black Xbox next to the big screen TV and taps the button at the controller's center. The light on the machine glows green, the minicomputer that serves as the game machine booting up.

"Ever play video games?" Rei asks.

Asuka shrugs, walking over to the couch and sitting next to Rei.

"N-not really," she says, "I never had time."

Rei nods, grabbing a second controller and handing it to Asuka. Music like measured chimes begins playing from the widescreen TV.

"'Kay. I just got a copy of *Final Fantasy XVI,* and this one's got co-op! So I'll walk you through it, 'cause I usually play with Hatchi and she's a minmaxing troll."

Asuka blinks.

"Wait," she says, "If it says 'Final,' how are there sixteen..."

...

The cafeteria kitchen is one he's seen before. He recognizes it, in fact, from NERV. The massive wall of fridges that are used to feed all of NERV on a given day. The industrial stoves, the water tanks and storage shelves. The fourteen year old, pale skinned, blue haired girl he also recognizes, as she places the second empty bottle on the counter, both of them labeled in English. Both of them dripping with the black liquid that was once theirs.

And then the girl giggles, shakes, and disappears.

"Um...was there a glitch in the video?"

"No," Yui explains, "Our best guess is that Rei vibrated so fast she became invisible."

Shinji stares at his mother. He stares some more. And some more.

"This is why Nephilim are not allowed caffeine."

He blinks, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"So...what was she drinking?"

"It's called the Black Blood of the Earth," she explains, "A chemist on San Francisco Island makes it. It's a coffee that's thirty times as strong as normal coffee."

"...why?"

"Because," she says, "NERV bought thirty liters. It's well liked by Project E staff. Rei drank two liters after her birthday lunch and disappeared. We've been trying to piece together the events for the past two years."

He sits back in his chair, twitching.

"Mom?"

"Yes, Shinji?"

"Why are we taking the train?"

Yui sighs, clicking off the PDA and stuffing it into her loose, blue

jacket.

"Because if we took a car, it would take seven hours, and we would argue the entire time," she says, "Especially if I wanted to talk about what you and Asuka have been getting up to."

He groans.

"God," he groans, "Is *everything* about sex with you?"

"That's my line."

Both roll their eyes, clicking their tongues in mirrored motions and staring at each other.

"Shinji, you're a young man and I'm very proud of you-"

"But you're going to get me fixed, aren't you?"

"No. You have to give me grandchildren, first. I imagine Misato isn't happy with this."

"No, she isn't," he sighs, "And look! It's not like we *can't stop*, it's just...well, it happened last night! Just like the first time! This is how I should have known about the dream, because it was seven weeks of you not lecturing me!"

Yui pinches the bridge of her nose and leans back in her seat, as the argument leaves Shinji in the form of wild gesticulations and finally a pained moan as he collapses back into his seat.

"You're like Kei," she says, "You're exactly like Kei! You question every single thing I do!"

"No, I question you because I'm being sarcastic," he responds, "Kei questions you because she wants to copy you."

"And you're doing it again!"

Which, having finally had enough, the other residents of the car turn, and with a loud bellow, let roar a,

"*WILL YOU SHUT UP!"*

Mother and son sink into their seats.

"Where's our Section 2 escort?" he asks.

"That *was* our Section 2 escort."

...

Berlin, deep underneath. The lowest levels of the Second Branch are the home to a solitary being, the last sliver of an entity which once strode the world like an Old Testament God. He is...he was...the Angel of Might.

Arm of God.

Zeruel.

Now he is a fist sized mass of crystal floating in LCL, in silent reflection, silent loathing of what he has become. He had victory. He had his battle. Now, he has nothing. But that does not deter the one watching him.

The door opens. Kaworu Nagisa, eyes sullen, face drawn, enters to once more attempt to speak to his silent brother. Opening his mouth, he looks up, and words fail him.

Zeruel, as always, remains unresponsive. But Zeruel is not alone in this room. The silver and blue sphere hovering before the cylinder pauses, and slowly rotates as it notices the entrance of the nephilem. It is smooth, round, a perfect sphere of something that resembles metal, but is not. At first, Kaworu believes that it is one of Kei's experiments, which means she found Zeruel. But it is not. It is not mechanical nor scientific.

But instead, as he unwraps his overmind, he senses it. The light which keeps the sphere aloft and mobile. The music it emits on a level no human nor animal can hear.

An AT Field.

The sphere darts over, the front of it irising open and painting him with a green light.

"*Tabris?"* it asks, spinning around him, "*Tabris. Tabris! You are Tabris. Yes, you are Tabris.*"

The sphere darts away, resuming its place in front of Zeruel's fragment. And then it dips, glows, and disappears into the floor.

...

"So...I never thought of you as a cat person, Touji."

Hikari Horaki is a much better cat person than Touji Suzuhara. The fact that she has not a) dropped, b) been scratched, or c) been bitten by the white and ginger fluff nugget, despite cradling her like a baby which Touji knows *from direct experience Sophie hates* says as much. Sighing, walking with his girlfriend down the main street of Downtown Tokyo-3, Touji decides the best thing to do would be to come clean.

"I'll be honest with ya," he says, "Neither did I. I got Sophie for Kana, my little sister, couple'a days after we got back from America."

"Aw."

"Yeah. Turns out, Kana doesn't want a cat. Kana never wanted a cat. Kana wanted a pony. Like with rainbows and wings and stuff. Which could do long division and do her homework for her. Not a real pet."

"Aw," Hikari says, as Sophie waves her front paws in front of Hikari's face, mewling happily, "So you kept her?"

Touji shrugs.

"I told the lady at the pound I'd get someone to take care of her," he says, "And I promised. Not good to go back on promises, ya'know? So I take care of her." He sips his canned coffee, relieved that he does not have to carry the cat. Sophie has a tendency of climbing you. With claws, like itty bitty knives. "So howsabout you? What'cha planning for the election?"

"Oh, I'm going to crush my opponents with Rei's help," Hikari says, dancing a finger on Sophie's nose, "Aw! You're so cute! 'Cause you're a kitty!"

Sophie mewls something back, which for a moment sounds suspiciously to Touji like, 'I'm a kitty', but he dismisses that. After all, Sophie being able to speak would be ridiculous. Completely ridiculous.

"Anyway," he says, "So do you need help crushing opposition? 'Cause I'm good at crushing and..."

They turn, off the main street, to a side street. Towards a grocery store Hikari likes shopping at, 'cause he's the boyfriend and he helps her shop, and in return she makes good food. Which is good, in a R-brain sort of way.

Except now, in front of the market, there is a bird. Except it is not a bird. Because it is twice their height, glowing, and perched on the dumpster outside of the mart, a half eaten ham hanging from its beak as two black eyes- the cool spots on its iridescence- stare at them.

"Okay," Touji says, "That's bad. Run."

"*Ruuuu~uuu~uun.*"

"Did it just tell us to run?" Hikari asks.

Touji doesn't answer. Instead, he grabs the cat from Hikari, grabs her arm, and with cat under one arm and girlfriend attached to another, Touji Suzuhara runs like Hell.

...

They've spent the past hour in silence. He, alternating between staring out the window and scribbling in his homework in a workbook. She, looking over notes on her pad, swapping out batteries for it, and watching muted videos of a birthday party. The landscape speeds past at speeds in excess of 300 kilometers per hour, but not a single sound from either of them.

"Okay," Yui says, "Look. I'm sorry."

He cocks an eyebrow. Closing his book, turns to her.

"About?"

"About...lecturing about you and Asuka," she responds, clicking the button on the top of her PDA and shutting it down, "It's been upsetting you, and I really don't have the high ground to do that, either."

He blinks. Rubs the bridge of his nose. It's going to be one of *those* conversations, he thinks.

"What?" he asks, "Mom, you're...well, you're my mom. You *have* the moral highground to...I mean, you can lecture me about this. You're my Mom."

"You don't live with me," she responds, "Your aunt raised you. I feel like I'm...forcing myself into your life to make you listen to me when I lecture you about this. If anyone has the *right* to tell you what to do, it's Misato, because she's the one you'd keep up at night. And it's not like you're being irresponsible about this, either."

She trails off. Another sigh, mirroring his own. For all the talk about her not being *responsible* for him, the mirror like actions do not help.

"Mom, what's this about?"

A small smile crosses Yui's lips.

"Partially blaming myself," she says, "I'm very proud of how you and Asuka have turned out. We're all happy that you're together, especially Kyoko, even if she never verbalizes it. You and Asuka have been a...catalyst for helping her relationship with her children. A butterfly effect, if you will."

"Uh huh."

"And I'm worried we pushed you two too hard, and too fast."

He shakes his head.

"Mom, ever hear the expression, 'If you did it right, you can't prove you did anything at all?'"

"Not really."

"It's from a cartoon. It means...well, it means if you did something right, no one can actually prove you did something. Let's just say, the whole setting me and Asuka up? You did it right."

Yui taps her fingers on her arm rests.

"Oh," she says.

Another moment of silence.

"So...you didn't feel pressured into this by me or Rei or..."

"No," he says, "My girlfriend is a beautiful redhead that I am in love with. I did not see the guiding hand of you, Misato, Rei, or the MAGI when we decided to...you know."

Behind them, one of the Section 2 escorts pinches his nose and takes a

sip of his whiskey flask.

"Oh," Yui says, "Well. You're using-"

"*Yes.* We are."

...

The fact that the cat is hissing does not help, mainly because the thing that is chasing them is mimicking the hissing in response. Hikari is screaming. She is probably watching whatever it is that is chasing them, and hence has a good reason to scream. He doesn't want to scream. He just wants to *run.*

Exiting the alleyway, Touji stops, skids, and dives to the side, pulling his girlfriend while pressing Sophie against his chest, landing on his back. Forward momentum on two teenagers and a kitty is not very high, which is one of the reasons Touji is glad that he got tutoring from Asuka on his physics homework when they were in Vegas.

The burst of light from the alleyway. The thing chasing them, on the other hand, has a *lot* of momentum, because it is *very* big. It has doubled its size, added a second pair of legs, and its wings are unfurled on its back as it opens its beak and shrieks. Landing in the street, it rears its back up, curling out a glowing white, whip like tail, two black eyes centering on the two.

"That's a gryphon," Hikari says, from behind Touji.

"Hikari, not now."

"No, I mean I was planning on putting one in a campaign I was planning with Rei and it didn't look like that before-"

The creature shrieks, rearing its back, feathers of light rising as the black space between the blades of its beak opens wide. Sophie peaks her head up from Touji's arms and hisses, the Gryphon hissing back.

Which is just when the car barrels right into the Gryphon, sending it flying down the street.

...

"W-wait. I just spent *two hours* as the character I c-created and now I'm the blonde gunslinger who just appeared? Why?"

"Because it's a plot twist!"

"That's *stupid."*

Asuka taps furiously on the buttons on the controller, grinding her teeth. Rei, on the other hand, is considerably more *relaxed.* For many reasons. They have just finished the worst battle they've had in a long time. Her friend, Go-kun, is still alive, which she didn't think would happen.

And this is the first time in a long time that Rei's been able to spend time with her friend.

"So, anyway," Rei says, leaning back on the couch, "What've you been doing?"

Asuka starts, hits the pause button, and blushes furiously. It is no secret what she's been up to with *Shinji*, which gets a smile from Rei. A smile of pride, really, since she *did* help set those two up. For reasons. And stuff. And junk.

"W-well," Asuka says, scratching the back of her neck, "I'm going to Berlin for two weeks."

She shrugs.

"M-maybe longer. My father asked me to, and I said yes."

She sighs.

"I h-haven't told Shinji yet."

"Ooooo."

"I kn-know," Asuka says, "I'm not sure how he's going to react. I m-mean, I *want* to spend time with my father. I never really knew him before h-he came to Tokyo-3. And Mari's stuck here, so he'd be all alone in Berlin..."

"But..."

"But," she says, and sighs, "I...I grew up in Berlin. I spent my life in Berlin...but I don't really *know* anyone in Berlin."

Rei smiles. It is not her normal, toothy, Rei smile. Instead, it is more subtle, kinder. Warmer.

"'Cept Kei."

...

The car door opens as the top pulls down, the sports car becoming a convertible. Hikari and Touji look up to see that the car which has rammed the thing chasing them, coming out of nowhere to save them, is in fact driven by someone they should *expect* this sort of thing from.

"Miss Katsuragi?" Hikari asks.

Stepping out of the car, Misato reaches into her jacket and pulls out her gun, glancing at the hood of her car for a moment before turning back to the glowing white gryphon as it stands, shaking its head.

"NERV, this is Katsuragi," she says, clicking the bluetooth in her ear, "I've got a confirmed Angelic life form at the South Markets! Description matches what Uri told us about Zophael!"

The gryphon stares at her. Eyes lock, and Misato clenches her eyes shut, a trickly of blood escaping her nose. The form of the creature shifts, shedding off the wings and extra mass into a puddle around it, a humanoid figure rising. Iridescent and white, it shines like ADAM does, but more streamlined and human in its form, proportional to a Lilim. It is white, with black cool spots on it. Black lines running down the arms and legs like the lines of a jumpsuit, on the shoulders as it flexes newly mobile, humanoid joints, a bird like face on its head, solid black and staring at Misato.

The creature tilts its head, and recoils, arms up as Misato opens fire. The air before the shapeshifter freezes and glows gold, catching the bullets. A quick glance from side to side, and the white figure turns, running and leaping into the air. The air shifts, flowing, taking form and mass around it, into a shell that is short and square shaped, a jutting front baring black lines like a grill. As it falls, four wheels of white, black at the center, form, and spinning as they propel the shape forward.

Misato blinks, gun forgotten in her hand. Clicking the safety back on, she turns to the two kids, who are already in the back seat of her car.

"No time to argue!" Hikari says, Sophie snarling and hissing in the direction of the Angel, "Go go go!"

Misato sighs. Might as well break the news to them while they do this.

"NERV! Confirm pattern blue! There is an Angel which has taken the form of a white suited humanoid and he is driving an economy car!"

She hops over the drivers seat, tapping the ignition button as the top folds back on.

"No, Ritz. I am *not* drinking!"

And gunning the engine, she takes off in pursuit.

...

The Big Screen folds out, illuminating a stretch of Tokyo-3's Market Distict. A red dot, speeding down the street at speeds approaching and then passing the speed limit, in pursuit of a blue dot that is going far faster than an economy car has any right to.

"Blue pattern confirmed!" Maya announces, "Repeat, it's an Angel!"

A hand on her shoulder, and she looks up.

"Maya," Ritsuko says, "Disengage the system locks, just in case."

"Got it," Maya says, turning back to her console, "MAGI-00 is in battle configuration. The girls are in place and online."

Another screen folds out, the four hubs representing the MAGI blinking green as they come online. On the Big Screen, dots hovering the market district turn red.

...

And above, traffic lights in a straight line from one end of the Market District to the other turn red, on all sides. Plates in the ground shift, forming speed bumps which stop traffic in its tracks. And on the single lane which runs the length of the district, bystanders watch as the off white car speeds down, dragging discarded newspapers behind it. And with a roar of its engine, the alpine blue sports car is in pursuit.

In the backseat, the two passengers scream at the truck midway through the intersection, before Misato jerks the wheel to the side, dodging it, swerving before gunning the engine after the angel. Sophie peaks her head out from the front of Hikari's blouse, shrieking alongside her owner and preferred human.

"NERV, keeps the lights red!" Misato yells into her earpiece, "We're exiting the Market District and we're heading towards City Center! I'm trying to herd it towards the tunnels!"

The blocks of Tokyo-3 pass in a blur as the speedometer hits triple digits, the Angel's car form shifting, streamlining as it picks up speed. The engine if the car roars louder, drowning out the kids screaming, Misato narrowing her eyes as she pushes the pedal closer and closer to the floor...

Which is when the Angel shifts again, turning flat, and driving up the side of the building in front. Misato screams out a swear, jamming on the brakes and yanking the wheel to the side. Hikari, Touji, and Sophie scream in unison, the car swerving, sliding sideways towards the office building. The wheels spin, digging grooves into the asphalt and cement, smoke billowing from the four pipe exhaust vent on the back before coming to a stop inches from the building wall.

Ear to ear grin on her face, Misato grips the wheel with white knuckles.

"I fucking *love* this car!"

Hikari collapses against the pale white Touji. Trembling, Sophie retreats into her shirt.

"**Thank you for the compliment, Colonel Katsuragi, but your own excellent driving skills made that maneuver much easier to pull off.**"

They stare at the stereo. Sophie hisses.

"Miss Katsuragi?" Touji asks, "Why does your car sound like Optimus Prime?"

...

"Approaching Okayama shortly. Passengers, please prepare to disembark."

Yui Ikari turns to her son, scribbled notes on the dream world in her notebook.

"Wait," she says, "I had *Nana* pilot an Evangelion? Which one?"

Shinji winces at the memory.

"Go-kun."

Yui blanches.

"Was I *drinking?"*

Shinji shrugs. Yui turns back to the notes, blinking at them, and closes her notebook.

"I think there may have been a bit of wish fulfillment in there, Shinji."

"Mom..."

"Not just Mana, but *Mari* was attracted to you? And *JA-Tan?"*

"And Lilith."

"Yes," Yui sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, a motion mirrored by her son, "Well, she is the mother of all life, and we did diagnose you with an Oedipus complex."

Shinji turns to her, looking as if he just ate bad fish. Or more importantly, somewhat pale.

"*What."*

"It's *obvious,*" Yui says with a shrug, as the Section 2 agent behind her passes his flask to the man next to him, "You're very clingy and you don't get along that well with your father. So, I wanted to see why, and had someone diagnose you, and they came back that you have a minor Oedipus complex. Nothing major, but subconscious."

She shrugs, and sips her coffee, before putting the mug back in the drink holder in front of her.

"Oh...kay," Shinji says, "Who diagnosed me?"

"Naoko."

"And wasn't she *insane?"*

Yui sucks her teeth.

"Yes. You have a point."

"And I don't have an Oedipus complex. I seriously don't." Shinji sighs, put upon. "Did you seriously have me diagnosed when I was six? And why did you tell me this?"

"Because of what happened in the dream. Dreams are related to your subconscious, so the dream takes some things from your subconscious, and this lines up with some subconscious issues you might have."

The speaker crackles, announcements playing.

"Good. We're here."

Yui gets up, grabbing her knapsack from the compartment overhead and waiting to the exits. Sighing, still mumbling that he's the sane member of his family, Shinji follows.

...

"Yeah. Right here."

Stepping out of the taxi, the duffle bag falls onto the curb.

Wallet lighter, legs heavy, he runs a hand over his stubble covered face, gray and black covering his chin, cheeks and lips like dirty moss on a tree. Kaji Ryouji is still trying to figure out what the fuck just happened.

There were times in college that he and Katsuragi would get so drunk they'd wake up in class, or in a nearby town, or naked in a tree in the forests outside the campus. But he's never gotten so drunk that he woke up in *another country*. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he looks up at the apartment building. He needs to give Mana a call and let her know he's back. He needs to give Katsuragi a call and let her know he's back. Then he needs to head down to NERV and find out what the *Hell* just happened.

And maybe get a drink.

Perking an ear, he hears the long drone, picking in pitch and sound, and pulls his duffle out of the way just as a glowing white car, seams like veins covering it, speeds by at speeds no box shape car has any

right to.

Another drone and Kaji wisely steps back, just as the blue sports car speeds by, blasting its horn. In that moment does Kaji Ryouji spot the purple hair of the driver, and the terrified faces of the two teenagers in the back.

"They gave Misato a Zonda?" he asks.

A beat, silence.

"Haven't they ever seen her *drive?"*

...

---

*"*Go-kun, I am smiling because I am driving faster than I ever had while on the ground and I'm glad to see you're not worshipping the *Great Old Ones*, but I am *pissed off.* Who installed an *Evangelion-class AI into my sports car?"*

Blocks speed past, giving way to the view of the Tokyo-3 municipal park on the side, the engine roaring like a jet intake. In the back, Touji, Hikari, and Sophie are silent. They most likely realize that screaming at the unsafe, insane speeds will not help them anymore.

"**That would be Doctor Akagi, Colonel Katsuragi.**"

"Ritz? *Ritz* installed you?"

"**Less installed and more worked with the Ree to set up a permanent, uninterrupted datalink with my Core. It allows me real time communication via a specialized dirac linkup so we don't have to worry about bandwidth issues.**"

Misato stares at the stereo, and the red, vibrating line representing Go-kun's voice.

"**Yes, Doctor Akagi installed me into your car.**"

Misato's hands roll over the steering wheel. Her knuckles audible crack.

"Why?"

There is a sound from the stereo. Like sucking teeth. A holographic

display with charts, a line which peaks and falls, and lettering underneath it which Misato reads with one eye.

"That's *blood alcohol level?"* she says, tone calm but volume that of a scream, "*Ritz installed a breathalyzer in my fucking sports car?"*

"**In her defense, Colonel Katsuragi, she-look out!"**

Misato looks back up. Both students go pale. As the city gives way to the main Tokyo-3 municipal tunnel, they watch as the line of red lights before them approach, as the Zophael car drives along the side of the tunnel, a flat and sleek thing escaping into the distance.

Jamming her foot down on the brakes, Misato breathes out a litany of curses, only to find the car not slowing down. Instead, the engine roars, the seats sliding back as the dashboard parts down the middle.

"Go-kun, what are you doing?"

"Engaging pursuit of the Angel. I would suggest making sure your seatbelts are fastened."

The entire body dips closer to the ground, the hood lengthening and angling down. The trunk parts and rises, the four pipe exhaust port parting and rising to two mounts on either side of the car before the pipes glow, spurt, and release two gouts of blue flame.

Picking up speed in time with Touji's shriek, the car swerves, skidding on two wheels before climbing up the wall and the ceiling. Hikari grips Sophie tightly. Misato still has her hands on the wheel. Touji, however, falls onto the ceiling, everyone silent as they watch the traffic below them as the car races across the ceiling.

"**Colonel Katsuragi, I hope you don't mind if I seize control while we're using my jet engines. Does anyone mind if I put on some music? No? Okay."**

Guitar twangs start from the stereo. The car itself rocks side to side, not enough to sway it but just enough to give them the sense of Go-kun dancing to the music.

"***Oh I left my home in Northfolk Virgnia/California on my mind! Straddled that puppy and rode into Raleigh and all across Caroline."***

Touji grunts, looking up from his squat on the ceiling.

"***Someone help get out of Louisiana/Just help me get to Houston Town,"***

Touji and Hikari scream, right as the car swerves, missing the sign on the ceiling.

"***People there who care a little 'bout me and they wouldn't let the poor boy down.*** **Alright now!"**

The car begins beat boxing, humming along with the guitar riffs as Touji tries to get a steady footing on the ceiling. Confident that Go-kun is now, indeed, driving, Misato lets go of the wheel and turns to her two passengers.

"Hey, I know this probably isn't the *best* time," she says, "But how do you two feel about being Eva pilots?"

...

"Shinji, may I ask *why* you had to hold onto the door handle for the entire trip?"

His mother is giving him the *look.* It's the look every mother knows. The one that makes you realize *what you did, young man/woman and you should be very, very embarrassed for making me look at you like this.* It is a very verbose look, and from the power behind it, he can tell this was part of her bag of tricks for raising eight Lilithian Nephilim and one Evangelion.

"It's a long story," he responds, hand loosening on the wooden door handle as the car comes to a stop.

Yui sighs, rolling her eyes.

"Let me guess. In the Dream, I drove like Rei?"

"With Asuka," he responds, nodding, "I think...uh...because we both were passengers with Rei when she drove."

The car comes to a stop. Deftly moving the gear stick into neutral, she turns to her son and folds her arms over her chest.

"Shinji, at any point did I exceed the speed limit?"

"I dunno?" he asks, "At any point did you *approach* the speed limit?"

Yui sighs, again. She does that a lot whenever she spends time with her son.

"I'm going to have words with your Aunt. She's the reason you're so sarcastic and passive aggressive. You learned from the master."

"Uh huh," he says, folding his arms in a fashion mirroring his mother, "Because it certainly couldn't come from any deep seeded resentment on how I'm the unfavorite, at all."

"You think I'm going to forget that your birthday passed during the dream."

He stares at her.

"I'm your *mother,*" she says, "I've known you nine months longer than any other person in your life. All screw ups on all sides aside, you're my *son* and I love you very much. But, if you keep insisting on behaving like this, I'm going to tell your Aunt Alicia that you and Asuka have had sex."

He freezes. Turns to her. Realizes what sort of hell he'd be in for if she did that.

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

He shudders.

"I'll be good," he says.

Yui smiles, and exits the car, walking up the sidewalk to the wide, single floor blue and green house, just off the main road leading into Okayama proper. The door to the house opens, and a blonde haired woman in a green sweater which matches her eyes and a pair of worn jeans exits, standing in front of the door with her arms folded in front of her.

"Yui," she says, and smiles, "Come for another child?"

Her smiles forces itself into a pout, biting her lip.

"I'm sorry, but we're fresh out. But I'm pretty sure that if I liquor up Tomoe, we can have another one ready for you in...ten months? Is that good?"

Standing behind the screen door, Tomoe Ikari, almost a mirror image to Shinji moreso than Yui herself, palms his face and groans.

The other car door opens, and Shinji peaks his head out. Alicia's expression changes. Her smiles turns genuine, looking past her sister in law to her nephew, whom she raised as a son as he sheepishly waves.

"Shinji?" Alicia asks, her face brightening, "Shinji! I can't believe you're back here..."

Alicia turns to Yui.

"What's wrong?" Alicia asks, "You needed to butter me up for something, didn't you?"

"I can't visit my brother and his family?" Yui asks.

"No."

Shinji palms his face, mirroring his uncle. Sighing, he walks from the car over to his mother and aunt, rolling his eyes as Alicia grabs him by the chin and pulls his face up to hers.

"You've grown a bit," Alicia says, "Have they been treating you alright? I hope your father finally learned how to cook."

"I'm...uh...not living with Mom and Dad," Shinji explains, "I'm living with-"

"Whaaaa?" Alicia asks, turning to Yui, "You yank him to the other side of Japan and he's not living with you?"

"It's a long story," Yui says, "Alicia, we've just taken the bullet train here, I'm tired and I could use a drink. Can we talk?"

Alicia nods, grabbing Yui by the elbow and pulling her into the house. Shinji follows, Tomoe Ikari placing his arm around Shinji's shoulder as Yui and Alicia disappear into the study.

"Oh thank *God* you're here," he says, "If it was just Yui, those two would spend all day sniping each other outside the house. Where's the bodyguards?"

"Dunno. Probably your neighbors, actually."

Tomoe nods.

"Good to know you're not living with them," he says, "You father can burn water. Seriously. And your mother has the stomach of a goat. I once saw her eat a chocolate bar with the wrapper still on it."

Shinji nods.

"I know," he says, "Asuka and I alternate cooking duties."

Tomoe raises an eyebrow. One of the advantages of living here, Shinji realized, was that his uncle looked almost exactly like him. So there wasn't the disconnect of being raised by strangers.

"Asuka?" he asks.

"My girlfriend," Shinji says, not missing a beat, "Have you ever met Doctor Sohryu?"

"Bitch who fell off the bitch tree and hit every bitch branch on the way down?"

"Her daughter," Shinji says with a nod, "Night and day. Did you save the SDAT I came over here with when Mom and Dad sent me to live with you?"

Tomoe nods.

"Why?"

"One of my sisters is very sick," Shinji explains, "Dr. Akagi, the woman I stayed with while Mom was recovering, may have left something on the old SDAT. If it's here, well..."

Tomoe nods, and gesturing to the room at the far end of the hallway, leads him towards the door.

...

Jets retracted, once more driving upon the road proper, the Zonda speeds down the outskirts of Tokyo-3 proper as it chases the angel.

"Go-kun, anything?"

"According to the satellite feeds, we should be approaching the location of the oh dear."

It clears the horizon. Steam bellows from the pipes, the engine of it emitting a high pitched whine, like a car as it approaches you but higher and louder. The entire thing glows save for the windows, where they can see the white figure at the wheel, shaking with the entire unholy contraption as the new form- a Mach Truck- barrels down on them.

"Well, fuck," Misato says, "Go-kun?"

"**I got this.**"

The engine whirs up. The hood rises, separating and reforming into a wedge in front, become a blade twice as tall as the car itself. The exhaust pipe glows, sputters, and ignites into a jet engine, Hikari and Touji opting not as much to screen as much as hold each other tightly as the car speeds down the road, roaring as it leaves the wheels in time with Sophie's shriek.

The car slams into the truck at somewhere just around 300 miles per hour. The hood-blade, sharpened to a fine point, slices into the angelic flesh and weakened AT Field. First through the engine, which does not actually have an engine and thus parts quite easily for the rocket powered blade, and then through the pilot itself, tilting its head before it is bissected and dissolves into a spray of petals, wings, and light.

The truck explodes, not in fire and flame but in light and air, the car flying through before resuming its default form as it lands on four wheels.

"Fuck yes!" Misato says, "That's *two,* count'em, *two* Angels I've taken down!"

Flashing the V-sign, she guns the engine and turns the car back towards NERV, turning around to her guests to find them passed out in the back seat along with the cat.

"Eh," she says, "I need to get them to NERV to sign their contracts, anyway."

...

And the car speeds down the road back to Tokyo-3.

Hesitantly, Shinji stands in front of the door and holds his hand out,

knuckles first. This is part of what he remembers from the dream world. That there was one thing which he was, in a way, responsible for. Sighing, he knocks on the door, hearing the muted call to enter, and pushes the door open. The room is not...exactly...what he expected, from Asuka's descriptions in the dream world.

The holographic platform is not there. However, he does notice the honeycomb configuration of twelve screens planted up against the wall, three glowing CPUs running as datastreams, news casts, and dozens of instant messengers run constantly, a line running from them to the keyboard in her lap as she sits on her bed.

Her blonde hair is still in curlers, dry over hours, still in a housecoat and pajamas.

"Huh," he says, "You've gotten all this since Vegas?"

"Well, some of us can use our time efficiently," Annette Ikari responds, "Unlike others."

"My God. You've spent too much time around Mom."

"Incidentally, I believe one of your sisters is sleeping with Kaworu Nagisa," she continues, typing.

"That wouldn't surprise me."

She raises an eyebrow.

"So, imagining it right now, then?"

He blinks.

"What."

"I've seen your porn collection," she says, and shakes her head, clicking her tongue, "Terrible taste in artists. And the plotlines? Horrible. But..."

She shrugs.

"Whatever turns you on."

Shinji shakes his head, sighing.

"At least some of us show self restraint."

He glances around. The room, outside of the computer monitors and tech, is the same as it was when he left this house to go to Tokyo-3. Which strikes him as odd, but understandably. He remembers hearing about his cousin- how she was miserable, how she was alone, how she had problems adjusting back to home after ten years in Berlin and had to be dropped down a grade due to her kanji not being up to snuff.

Walking over, he pulls the keyboard out of her hands and grabs her arm.

"Hey! Just what do you think you-"

"Come with me," he says with a sigh, pulling her up and out of the bedroom. Walking across the hall with her, Annette uncharacteristically silent, he opens the door to the study as his aunt, uncle, and mother turn to them.

"Hey," Shinji says, "We got the SDAT. Also, Mom? Uncle Tomoe, Aunt Alicia? I have an idea."

"Yes?' Yui asks.

Pulling Annette with him to stand at the center of the study, he clears his throat, folds his hands behind him as Annette fidgets.

"Okay," he says, "Hear me out. Mom, Annette can, conceivably, pilot an Eva, right?"

Alicia and Tomoe tilt their heads, and turn to Yui.

"What?" Alicia asks.

"Conceivably," Yui says, waving them off, "But not enough to actually even train her. I went over that with the scholarship and compensation issue."

"But," Shinji adds, "Wouldn't it be...I dunno...safer...for Annette to live in Tokyo-3, then?"

"Piloting?" Annette asks, "Trying to get me killed?"

"If piloting gets you killed, it has a poor success rate on me," he responds, "Not like you'd pilot. I think Ichi has a snark limit, and you'd exceed it."

"Wait," Alicia says, "Shinji, why are you suggesting this?"

"Because, well," he says, and shrugs, "Aunt Alicia, Annette's miserable here. Yeah, this is home but it's not..."

"Where I grew up," Annette finishes, "I...look. Shinji's right. For once. But I barely know any of my friends here. I'm still trying to catch up with everything. And I'm just...not used to it here, anymore."

"While in Tokyo-3," Shinji says, "There's people she knows. Mari, for one, would be glad to see her. I'm sure my sisters would love to meet their cousin. And I'm sure *Uri,*" Annette's cheeks flush, "Would be glad to see her."

"And NERV will provide the best tutors money can buy to bring her Kanji up to grade level," Yui adds, "So she won't go down a class. She'll be around friends, she'll be challenged, and she'll be happier."

Yui smiles at them both, but mainly at Shinji, mouthing a quiet, 'good boy' to him.

"And what about us?" Alicia asks.

"Annette stays with me and Gendo while you set things up," Yui says, "We have a beautiful apartment next to ours which is almost as big as the house, which you'll have for *free* so you don't have to sell the house. Tomoe, you can teach at the local high school, and Alicia, there will be plenty for you to do in Tokyo-3. It's a great opportunity."

They both nod. Alicia reaches out, squeezing her husband's hand.

"Okay," she says, "But, why?"

Yui shrugs.

"I screwed up, with all three of you," she says, "Let me make it up."

Lolling back and forth on his feet, Shinji smiles...a smile which slowly fades.

"I just engineered a situation where the girl who sat on my face and stole my lunch money goes to school with me again," he says, "I must be a masochist."

"I've seen your porn. Most likely," Annette responds.

He sighs.

"Yeah," he says, "Yeah. I might as well tell Asuka to get some whips,

chains and handcuffs."

He looks up, to find Alicia, Tomoe, and Yui staring at him.

"I said that out loud, didn't I?"

...

"I'm not sure what's ticking me off more about this, Ritz. That a *Cherubim* got into Tokyo-3 without us noticing or that you installed a *breathalyzer and autopilot* on my car without telling me!"

The briefing room, the holographic projection table and the theatre most commonly used for post-Angel battle debriefings. Assembled around the table are Misato, Gendo, Maya, Ritsuko, Asuka, and Rei. On the table itself is a hologram of the form that Zophael had taken- the white humanoid in a white, black lined jumpsuit, the round, helmet like head with the black cool spot where the bird skull mask would be on a typical Angel.

"Well," Ritsuko says, "Considering your initial report, and we didn't know that the Angel *was* Zophael, we did believe..."

She sucks her teeth. There's no diplomatic way to say, *'We believed you were drunk off your ass*', and hence the problem.

"You honestly didn't believe I was drunk when I called that in, did you?" Misato asks, "*Why?"*

"Zophael is an Angel which could access memories to catch you off guard," Maya explains, "From the way you described Zophael's appearance, we had to double check that yes, you were serious, and yes, that it was the actual Angel."

Misato snorts, arms folded, glaring at her friend.

"What do you mean?" Misato asks, "Layman's terms, Ritz."

"What's the last TV show you watched?" Ritsuko asks.

Misato shrugs, tapping her lip, scrunching her brow.

"Lemme see, I was watching last night, and I saw..."

Her eyes snap open.

"*Top Gear,*" she says, "The *fuck!* I was racing the *fucking Stig* in Tokyo-3! You thought that I was tipsy and yelling that I saw the *Stig* and I was going to race him in my race car! I *fucking* raced the *fucking Stig* and blew him up with my *transforming super car* which has a *jet engine and an Evangelion AI.*"

The room goes silent. Everyone looks to Rei, who is silent and staring at them, and then back to the table. Misato clears her throat. Ritsuko shifts side to side, as Maya clicks off her PDA.

"When you say it like that, it *does* sound like I was drinking," Misato says, scratching the back of her head.

"Well?" Gendo asks, "Did you beat his time?"

"Of course I beat his time. You've seen me drive."

They begin filing out, Misato muttering to herself about needing a speed board and a sidekick. Eventually, only the two pilots are left, Rei quietly leaning over and pulling Asuka's sleeve.

"Who's the Stig?" Rei asks.

Asuka shrugs.

Chapter 107: Like a Boss

Her hair is pulled back, from a pair of long pigtails to one long ponytail, the orange and black plugsuit hugging her petite frame tightly. She looks down, admiring the curves she has finally started developing in her sixteenth year, closer to her older sister than the rail like girl she was only two years ago. Touji, on the other hand, has his hands folded in front of him, clad in the green and black plugsuit. The cup built into it prevents anything from showing, but he is self conscious. Which is probably a reason that the other girl, still in her school uniform, mousy hair and nerves and her book bag, is blushing furiously.

"Okay," Misato says, tapping her PDA on, "Welcome to NERV. Everyone, allow me to introduce our three new backup pilots."

Behind her is Yui Ikari, Ritsuko Akagi, Rei, Shinji, and Uri. Shinji is attempting to not look directly at them. Hikari is one thing. It's no secret that there's been a good amount of tension between them, but her in a *plugsuit* is another matter entirely.

"So, we've got the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Child," Misato continues, "In order. Seventh Child is Hikari Horaki. Eighth Child is Touji Suzuhara. And the Ninth Child is Kirima Harisami. So, let me introduce the..."

Misato looks up. The mousy girl is gone, only a swinging ventilation duct marking where she was, Hikari and Touji both pale and staring at the spot Kiri stood.

"Huh," Misato says, "That's six seconds. Hatchi usually does that in four."

She turns to Yui.

"Is Hatchi, like, ill?"

Yui nods.

"She's been feeling off since the Dream ended."

"She's joking," Touji says, "Tell me she's joking."

"She's not joking," Hikari responds, "Um...Miss Katsuragi? Who will our trainer be?"

The pale girl smiles. Touji and Hikari both turn a noticeable shade of white that almost matches her.

"That'd be Rei," Misato responds.

Chapter 76:

Like a Boss

"So, explain to me. I've received reports about the seven missing weeks. I wanted to know your input."

Deep beneath Berlin, Germany, the plush chair is pulled over to the desk and the pale young man with ash hair and gold eyes sits down. Sitting across from him, behind the desk, Katsuhito Ikari, Professor, head of Project E-2, and acting Director of NERV's Second Branch leans back in his chair and absently unwraps a lollipop.

Glancing from side to side, the haunted young man looks up at his friend. There are bags under his eyes, lines around his mouth. In the past few days he seems to have aged a good thirty years, in spirit if not body.

"Is this room secure?"

"It is," Katsuhito responds, "What does Tabris know?"

Kaworu smirks.

"I appreciate that you differentiate us. It's not true, though. There is no point where Kaworu ends and Tabris begins."

"On the contrary. Tabris is the Angel which has allied itself with humanity. Kaworu Nagisa is the young man involved with my grand daughter."

Kaworu nods, another smile on his face.

"Well," he says, "You had gone insane."

Katsuhito nods.

"Why?" he asks.

"You found the Throne in the Amazon," Kaworu says, holding up a

hand to stop the question, "The Throne is the first of all the Angels. It was the first creation of ADAM. It is older and wiser and has a greater breadth of experience than any of us. It connected its mind to yours and you began mumbling about how 'it doesn't matter' or something along those lines."

Katsuhito nods, hands folded on his desk.

"I see. Then, best I not go to the Amazon then. Let's see if we can get the First Branch to retrieve the Throne. Considering the odd readings coming from the Amazon, an expedition there may be prudent," he says, "What else happened?"

"Kihl died."

"I see. How long was the celebration."

Kaworu sighs, staring at the old man.

"Katsuhito, I know his actions have been deplorable, but he is still my father."

Ikari nods.

"Yes. I apologize. We should inform the First Branch he is up and about. Preferably before Sohryu arrives."

Kaworu nods, moving to stand.

"Is there anything else?' Katsuhito asks, "Excuse my prying, but you seem troubled, Kaworu. Did something else happen in the dream?"

Kaworu sighs, and nods.

"It...didn't involve you, though," he says, "Excuse me. I need to check up on the Mark-06 and maybe talk to Kei."

Katsuhito nods.

"If you wish to talk," he says, "I'm here."

"Thank you, Katsuhito. I may take you up on that."

And without another word, Kaworu exits.

...

Tapping his foot, Shinji tries to remember if he actually had a speech prepared for the new pilots. Given, he also didn't anticipate the new pilots being a) the girl he flirted with before he met Asuka, b) the guy who is dating said girl and c) some other girl. Who knew Rei. And was sane.

"So," Shinji says, scratching the back of his head as he watches his mother on the phone, apparently talking to Hatchi, "What happened at Rei's fourteenth birthday party?"

Touji turns pale and starts shuddering, folding his hands in front of him as he looks away.

"Oh God," Hikari says, "Oh God. We'll never forget it. Not the sounds. Not what we saw."

"It was still moving," Touji whispers, "It was plucked, it was feathered, it was cooked but it was *still moving.* How was it moving?"

Next to Shinji, Uri sips at his canned coffee.

"I somehow see this being an interesting story," he says, "So. We should introduce them to the Evangelions."

Closing her phone, Yui claps her hands and walks over.

"Okay," she says, "Hatchi is going to return our third pilot when she's done seeing how much she's slacked off. So, any questions? Yes, Shinji?"

"Yeah," Shinji says, "Mom, who did Hatchi kidnap and why?"

"Kiri is a long time friend of Hatchi's," Yui responds, "They've been best friends for about...I'd say seven years or so. Hatchi, being Hatchi, has been training her as her 'sidekick,' so she wanted to make sure she's been keeping up in her training. I wanted to surprise Hatchi about her being a pilot, and she over reacted. Next question? Shinji?"

Shinji rubs his temples. Touji seems to still be mutely horrified to ask questions, Hikari is curious but nonverbal about it, and Uri doesn't seem to care.

"Mom, what exactly happened on Rei's fourteenth birthday? I know how it...began...and you showed me the whale video, but what happened? How'd you find Rei?"

Yui nods, tapping her foot.

"Well," she says, "We found Rei about...mm...midnight on that day..."

Yui climbs over the clearing, her PDA switched over to flashlight mode as visible relief comes over her, her walking in time with the vigorous, repeated sound of metal on earth.

"Rei! Thank God! We've been looking all over for you! Where have you been?"

She angles the light upward.

"How did you get Unit-00 here?"

She angles it back down.

"Where did you get that shovel? And where are your clothes?"

"I HAVE TO DIG."

...

"So..."

She holds up the article of clothing. Yellow. Too yellow, low cut cleavage, and a back which goes down past where the bra would be. Maybe to right where the bra would be. Holding it up, Kyoko looks past the dress to her daughter, clad in a white blouse and long skirt, her backpack held by one strap.

"I d-don't like it," Asuka says.

Kyoko glances at her daughter, then back at the dress.

"But. It's pretty?"

Asuka winces, shrugging.

"It's n-not my color," she says, "Besides which, it...um...shows too much skin. I don't like that style."

Kyoko sighs, nodding, and places it back on the rack. Sighing, she looks at the sparse, empty, wheeled bag between them, which should

be filled with clothing Asuka will take with her to Germany on her trip with her father.

"Maybe we should look at sweaters?" Asuka says.

"Good idea," Kyoko responds.

It is perpetually summer or springlike in Tokyo-3, while she remembers Berlin being bitterly cold this time of year. There is a lack of market for work clothes or down jackets in the Fortress City, even at the Tokyo-3 Community Market, the 15 story structure at the heart of the Market District that serves as the hub for most shopping trips.

They stop, Kyoko wheels the cart, in front of one of the display windows in the main clothing story. A poster is plastered onto the glass in front of the empty display, with warnings in four language that, summed up, warn against administering one particular person for reasons and transgressions which are outlined beneath her smiling photo.

"Do they really think this will keep Rei out?" Asuka asks.

"Let them dream," Kyoko responds.

Both tilt their heads, mentally counting the teeth in the picture.

"That...that's a lot of teeth."

"'Shark-like' should be a descriptor of personality, or temperament. Never of dental features."

Mother and daughter shudder.

"Coffee?" Asuka asks.

"Good idea."

...

Accessing MAGI -09 system start. Loading VR program.

Program load: Schoolhouse.

The world fades in from white. A circular room, several desks coming up to her knees with a larger desk at the other end of the room, in

front of a whiteboard and projector. She herself is rarely in the room, mainly because she herself rarely teaches the children. As her mother, she holds the distinct position of someone her children respect, and someone they wouldn't take seriously when attempting to educate them.

Hence, she has specialized programs which help educate the children. Well, 'children.' AI forks mixed with purloined data from Kaworu. Or, as they are known, the Keiworu.

"Yes?" Kei Ayanami asks, "The MAGI said someone started up this program. It's not scheduled to be used...so...let me guess who it is. 11-EF E5? Is that you?"

She turns to the desks, to find someone sitting on it. No blue or grey hair, like her children, but black hair and blue eyes, and a smiling face which she is very familiar with from growing up.

"Ichi?" Kei asks.

"Hi," Ichi says, "Sorry if I'm trespassing, Kei. But I wanted to talk a bit."

Kei nods. She gestures, and a pair of chairs appear.

"About what?" she asks.

"I'm sorry you got upset with Mom about me," Ichi says, hands folded in her lap, "I should've told you about what I really was and why Mommy always treated me special, but Mommy told me not to tell anyone because that would get us into a lot of trouble."

Kei nods, sitting in her chair. Ichi continues sitting on the desk, wringing her hands. An action very much like Kei's, when she was second guessing herself over her relocation to Berlin.

"Ichi," Kei says, "I'm sorry, too."

The trouble with real people, Kei reminds herself, is that they are real. As much as she believed she was a master manipulator when she was in the MAGI or around Kaworu, she realized two things upon being immersed in the real world. First, that computer programs obey along the lines of preprogrammed behavior. Secondly, that Kaworu is only slightly *less* predictable than computer programs.

Real people are not.

Still, she does feel bad for hating her. Ichi was, in a respect, the root cause of her breakdown. Realizing that Ichi was, in a sense, Yui's daughter made her believe that their mother didn't value Kei and her sisters. And more than that, it made her not see Ichi as her sister. But looking at the girl in front of her, the girl she would give piggy back rides to, and for whom she and the other Ree made the birthday present of a virtual world for, Kei can't help but kick herself for being angry at her.

It's like kicking a kitten.

Which then makes Kei envision Ichi in a kitten costume. Which gives her a slight headache for some reason.

"Ichi," Kei sighs, and bends down, pulling her into a hug, "It's not your fault. I was being stupid and I was being jealous, but I was never angry at *you."*

Ichi hugs her back. No other apologies are given, none are said. In all honesty to herself, Kei wonders why she didn't apologize to Ichi earlier.

The air in the VR shimmers, forming into a figure, which forms into Kaworu. The two sisters separate, and Ichi tilts her head, looking at the new arrival.

"Oooo," Ichi says, "Cool! So..."

Ichi hops off the desk, circling the visibly confused Kaworu.

"This is really good! He's almost as realistic as the NPCs in Nervia! So I guess you still a fan of Sephiroth, Kei? But his hair is wrong and he doesn't he have one wing?"

Kaworu cocks an eyebrow.

"Kei?" he asks.

"Kaworu," Kei says, "This is Ichi, my little sister. Ichi, this is Kaworu."

...

The term, according to Shinji, was *'Special Hell.'* That was how he described the train ride home...*ahem*...the train ride back to Tokyo-3, that is. Because, in addition to Shinji, his mother, and their retinue of

Section 2, there was another traveler with them, with a week of clothing packed into her suitcase in lieu of everything else arriving, and an attitude which the chief of the Section 2 escort company would describe in reports as 'Pratchett-like.'

Blonde hair pulled back to two pigtails, in a white flowery summer dress and blue sweater, 900 page book with english on the cover by an author who he's never heard of under her arm, Shinji glances at his cousin and wonders why, again, he does these sorts of things.

Right. Because he's a good person.

Yes.

"*-At the Lilly Lilitan home for Teenage Mothers-"*

click

"-in Chicago, where rescue crews are still recovering from the impact of-"

click

"-South American Ring of L-"

click

Shinji switches off the television, leaning forward with the creak of his plugsuit as he watches his cousin pace the lounge. He can see her as nervous, as worried. About something. In many respects, her wringing of her hands, the tightness on her lips, reminds him of Asuka.

He didn't just compare his prat cousin to the girl he loves, did he?

Crap.

"Are you nervous?" he asks.

She stops, turns. Looks at him, eyes pointed down, lips pursed. If not for the fact that she's blonde, 16, and half american, she would be the mirror image of his mother.

"Yes," she says, and sighs, continuing to wring her hands, "I haven't seen him in a while. He doesn't know I'm here?"

"No," Shinji responds, reaching to the table next to him and taking a can of milk tea, "I wanted to surprise him."

She grimaces.

"It's been a while since I saw him."

"It's been a week and a half," he says, adding mentally *Give or take seven weeks,* popping the top of his can and sipping it, "You can sit down, you know."

He is questioning if he should have changed beforehand. Mom and Misato both wanted the pilots in plugsuits to green the newbies. Given, it was mainly so Hikari and Touji- who both actually looked *natural* in their suits- realized that yes, it's supposed to look like that, but both of them have seen him, Asuka, Rei, or Uri in plugsuits before and oh good he's mentally ranting again.

Shinji sips his tea. The door opens.

"Ikari, what did you want to talk a...bout..."

Clad in his plugsuit, holding a PDA in one hand, Uriel Dolheb Sohryu freezes two steps into the lounge, staring at Annette as their eyes meet, and quickly part.

"Annette?" Uri asks, "What are you doing here?"

Shinji gets up, moving out of the line of sight between the two. Hands folded behind them, he allows himself a small smile at this turn of events. In the dream, they didn't see each other. Annette became miserable, Uri quick to anger. Here, however, but reuniting them, there is a chance for a better outcome.

"Are you a pilot?" Uri asks, "What Evangelion are you assigned to?"

Which, of course, is dependant on Uri not being a dork.

Annette's cheeks turn bright red and she begins stammering. Uri, realizing his foot is wedged firmly in his mouth, begins furiously scratching the back of his head, as Shinji rubs the bridge of his nose with a sigh. And down the hallway, staring at the whole scene through the doorway, Mana Kirishima grinds her teeth.

"...*fuck.*"

Which is when her PDA beeps with a message, and she runs to the elevator.

"Well, that went well," Shinji mutters, rubbing his temples as he walks down the hall, "Hopefully, at some point Uri will pull his head out of his ass and my cousin will *thank* me for dragging her to Tokyo-3."

He checks his watch. Two hours, so far. They have all the pilots on base, but no synch tests and they certainly haven't introduced the backups to the Evangelions, yet. Which means, Shinji realizes with a grimace, that the third pilot is probably still down in Sheol.

Rolling his eyes, he wonders, again, to himself, why no one has retrieved her. Tapping his foot, he looks up. Mentally, he clicks off the areas of NERV-1 and determines that he has left the lounge area, the rec room, the recreation wing and has ended up in the infirmary.

And his plugsuit is starting to itch.

"Craaaaaaaap," he mutters, "Uh...where's Mom? Or Misato?"

Past mirrored walls specially made to convert to two way windows, past rooms with numbers and scribbled in names on it, Shinji taps his left wrist, bringing up a map in his right eye on where he can find the Tac Ops commander or head of Project E. Or at least, tries to, before the door to his right swings open and the doorknob goes strait into his crotch.

A sound like a leaking balloon escapes his lips, and Shinji doubles over, looking up through hazed vision as the occupant of the room exits. Clad in white, flower print pajamas, he can just see the feet clad in fuzzy bunny slippers.

"I must go! My sisters need me!"

Turning towards the wall by Shinji, where there is a ventilation duct on the ceiling, he looks up to see her head haloed in the florescent light, as she raises a hand towards the ductwork.

"*Pour la justice grandiose!"*

She leaps, gracefully, into the air, arms outstretched to seize the grate, yank it off, and slip into the ventilation system in one smooth motion. Or would, at least, had she actually gained any real air. Instead, she crashes onto Shinji's stomach, making him groan as she knocks all the wind from him. He looks down.

A face, framed by brown hair, greenish blue eyes, and a face that is very, very familiar, looks back up.

"*Zut alors,*" Zyuu says, "Why do you have to be so hard?"

...

And miles away, hundreds of kilometers out to sea, something stirs. It was called, by the children of Lilith, Tamiel. It was the Many, a Legion in itself. It was fast, and terrible, and endless. And still, it saw its own death. Humiliated, torn apart, destroyed to the very core by the Lilim and their Shadows of Father. And by the Other, the shadow of the Enemy, who laid the Father low.

Now, it hides, it deliberates, it cowers in the depths. Far enough away so the Lilim cannot find it. Far enough away to consider what it should do, as the Cherubim-adaptable and numerous- begins to think *what should we do.*

The question is answered for it.

A flash of golden light carves the Pacific Ocean around the Cherubim, slicing out a cylinder of water which rises into the sky. Fish and other ocean life drop from the chunk of ocean, as the water itself parts, evaporates, and rains down until the collective of the Tamiel, two dozen strong, hang in the air. Barely humanoid, single blue eyes upon bone white heads, they look up and stare into the orange, pulsing sun they recognize as one of their number.

And the ring of white which surrounds it.

Arise, my brothers. Embrace the destiny that lies before you.

...

"All room systems are showing green. Containment systems online. Biorhythmic and metabiorhythmic monitoring systems...online."

The room that everyone else in is relatively large. About twice the size of Yui's office, with monitors splayed against the wall, each showing lines of numbers and graphs that neither Hikari nor Touji have any idea the meaning of. Standing next to them, steaming cup of coffee in

one hand and PDA in the other, Yui has a small grin on her face.

"So," she says, "Shinji's heading downstairs to get Kiri, then we're going to introduce you to the Evangelions you're going to be the backup pilots for. In the meantime, I thought it would be a good idea to show you this."

"Doctor Ikari?" Hikari asks, "What's that room for?"

Lights switch on, illuminating through panels on the larger room's ceiling. The walls, the walls and ceiling and floor, flex. Each panel moves independently, rippling outward and then collapsing back to a static state.

"Shock absorbers are reacting nominally," Maya says, "Field absorbers are set up and systems are green."

"The room is what we nickname the Wreck Room," Yui says, "As you know, Rei isn't exactly...normal and neither are her sisters. So when we want to get an idea of what Rei is capable of, we use this room. It's able to take whatever punishment Rei can give out, and also shielded so it doesn't trip the sensors around Tokyo-3."

Two people enter the room. Rei, who is stretching her arms above her head, in a slightly bulkier version of her plugsuit. They notice the higher collar, the padding around the chest and shoulder and extremities.

"The plugsuit Asuka made for her is transmitting," Maya says.

On the other side of the room, Mari enters, clad in her pink and white plugsuit, stretching her arms in front of her as she walks up to Rei. They talk, silent to the people in the overhead observation box, before stepping back and stretching.

"Internal sensors read blue patterns," Maya says, "Mari and Rei have both engaged their S2 organs."

"Okay," Yui says, "Girls. Begin."

...

It is no secret that Rei Ayanami likes to move. Far be it from her to carry herself as normal, the pale skinned, blue haired girl loves, more

than anything, to revel in her superhuman abilities. From crawling in ductwork, to running up walls, to breaking land speed records (for running, at least), she enjoys testing herself.

Hence, the Wreck Room. Where she, and her sisters, could test each other. Yui approved the idea in a heartbeat, but not for the same reasons Rei refers to the Evangelion-scale modified testing room as the "Best birthday present *ever*." No, Yui loves it because it gives the Ree the idea of consequence. In the VR world of the MAGI-00 server, the Ree can do anything they wish. But here, as much as it pains her, she had to allow them to see what happens if they push themselves, or don't learn to not pull a punch, or egg each other on a little too hard.

Of course, for today, this is also a tutorial. Yui knows fully well what Rei is capable of. As for the brunette girl in glasses, in the pink plugsuit and with the red sphere on the base of her neck cleverly disguised with the choker, they know dangerously little.

"'kay," Rei says, leaning on her back leg, hands half clenched in front of her, "Let's go, Mari."

Mari rolls her head from side to side, and adjusts her glasses. And then her feet leave the ground, her pupils glowing red as the air around her shifts and forms into eight panes of golden light, rippling into existence into a form reminiscent of a diamond.

Rei acts first. She tends to. Pushing off her foot with enough force to send the independently moving plates rippling back, she spins in the air, darting forward with an outstretched heel...

And hits nothing. Either teleporting or by moving too fast for *Rei* to track, Mari appears above Rei, grinning wickedly as she whips off her glasses. And Rei is given a moment to realize that yes, this is going to suck, as a wide beam of crimson light slams her into the floor.

Bouncing, curling up in a ball as the floor panels fold into a crater around her to cushion the impact, Rei pumps her legs and springs, twisting in mid air as her eyes glow and swinging a foot up. Layers of golden light crack and shatter, and Mari squeaks as Rei's booted foot comes within a hairs breadth of her face.

...

The shopping cart is still empty. Mainly because they've been in this

coffee bar longer than they've been clothes shopping.

Asuka's coffee has no doubt turned cold by now. It wasn't expensive, and it wasn't cheap. But Kyoko bites back the comment about wasting money. Yes, Kyoko insisted on paying for the coffee. She's paid enough by NERV that she could probably buy this coffee bar if she saved up for a year, and Asuka is her daughter and treating her every now and then helps make up for the sixteen years of her being a bitch who fell off the bitch tree and hit every bitch branch on the way down.

"What is that?" Kyoko asks.

Asuka looks up from the folded out, red and pink device in her hand. Cosmetically, it resembles a book, or a severely shortened laptop. A cartridge is jammed into one side, and a disc much smaller than an actual DVD is jammed into another end. Tapping buttons on either side of the touch screen, the lower of the two screens, a stylus is balanced between Asuka's index and middle finger. Tapping a button, the action on the screen pauses.

"Oh, this?" Asuka asks, "It's a Gamestation DS."

Kyoko raises an eyebrow.

"I've...never heard of that," she says, "Is it new?"

Despite her overall air as a humorless force of evil, Kyoko Sohryu is not ignorant of cultural trends. In fact, as the secondary head of the largest scientific project in history, she has to keep a heads up on new trends in electronic entertainment.

"Um...it's unique. Rei and I assembled it last night and I'm...um...stress testing it. We kludged together a DS and a PSP, so it can do both."

Ah, Kyoko thinks, Asuka has taken up video games.

"So you've taken up video games?" Kyoko asks, and winces when she realizes how sharp her tone is. Hobbies, she thinks. Not something she's seen from her daughter before. But the entire few months they've been here, give or take the seven weeks the entire planet spent in a fugue state, have been a transformative experience.

Asuka is starting to stammer a bit. Kyoko winces. Good old foot and mouth disease. Just like the old times between them, only without the horror and self mutilation. Outside of the little coffee bar, the masses

pass by in the Tokyo-3 shopping mall.

"A little," Asuka says with a shrug, "I mean, well...I can't be doing things for the entire time I'm in Berlin, can I?"

"Since I see little chance that your father will not pamper you every chance he gets, I believe that makes sense," Kyoko responds, a small grin on her face, "To his credit, your father does *want* to be a father. I've met a fair share of men who are...less inclined."

Asuka closes te device, clicking a button on the side. Neither of them meet their eyes for a moment. Taking the initiative, which is yet another pleasant change that her daughter has overcome, Asuka turns to her mother.

"Do...you and..."

"Your father?" Kyoko finishes.

Asuka nods.

"Do you love each other?"

Kyoko sighs, sipping her coffee.

"I believe so," she responds, "I hope so. Neither of us are good at expressing things like this. Which is why I encouraged him to go to Berlin for a time. We need distance. Normality. And he wants to be..*better*, I think. Which is why he wants to take you along."

She sips her coffee again. She isn't finding it as bitter as she should. Must be the ambiance.

"I...do want to know him," Asuka responds, fingers finding themselve intertwined, "It's...um...it's just..."

"Your father hasn't been there for most of your life." Kyoko sighs, and pinches her nose. "I blame myself. Our breakup was...not gentle. And harsher than it should have been. As much as his betrayal hurt me, I was not blameless either. I didn't magically become the shrill harpy I'm known as. I've been like this since I was younger than you."

Asuka's face lights up, a smile crossing her features. Folding her hands on the table and taking a sip from her paper cup, Kyoko inwardly winces but outwardly smiles, the awkward warm thing she has worn in recent weeks.

"How did...um...how did you two meet?"

Kyoko does not sigh, or groan. Then again, it has been a while since anyone gave two shits about her past.

"Well..."

...

The doors to the elevator open, and Uri, freshly changed to a NERV uniform following the whole...incident...with Annette, looks up to find the elevator occupied. One hand in his pocket, the other holding up the PDA which he is reading, Pieter looks up and briefly locks eyes with Uri before turning back to the report. Uri shrugs and walks in, pressing his floor button.

Muzak versions of Sinatra songs play over the speakers, as Pieter checks boxes on the PDA report, Uri folding his arms and standing stiff as a board.

"So," Pieter says.

Uri cocks an eyebrow, and turns his eyes towards him. Not his head. Just shifts his eyes.

"Am I your dad?" Pieter asks.

Uri pauses, staring at the older man. He can't read Pieter that well. Is that hope, he sees on his face? Or perhaps gas?

"No," Uri says, "Genetically, no. Socially...no. So that's a no."

Pieter nods, again.

"So...who is...?"

"I'm a clone," Uri says, "A modified clone."

Pieter continues staring at him.

"Do you know what a clone is?" Uri asks.

Pieter shakes his head. Scratching the back of his head, he pulls on a half smile, chuckling.

"Yeah, I'm not Project E," he says, "I'm administration and security. All I know is 'Clone' can be used as a substitute for 'Ayanami.'"

...

Part of the problem with the Ree, Shinji has realized, is that they might not understand what a clone is. Admittedly, he doesn't either. General education that he receives- and society at large- is not set up to explain situations like theirs. But Asuka has explained to him this sort of thing, and he's much more likely to listen to explanations from his girlfriend while he's trying to get her to sit down and not do *all* the chores than he is to listen to his teacher.

A clone, she explained, is a copy on a genetic level. This is different than a physical copy, because genetics are one of many factors that lead into appearance. There are environmental factors and other factors which go into appearance, so a normal clone is a could-have-been of the original on the genetic level.

Shinji blinks. Normal clone. Yeah.

But in any case, the Ree are not exact copies of his mother mixed with DNA from the marshmallow monster kept in the basement. For all the general impression they have- possible encouraged by NERV- they are not clones. They are children of his mother and Lilith, using her own eggs combined with something taken from Lilith in order to make them, well, them.

Which makes it all the more disconcerting when one realizes that all eight of them have the exact same hairstyle as a woman in her forties. This has become most evident with Zyuu, as the sixteen year old girl, in flower print pajamas and bunny slippers, has an actual skin color and dark brown hair. She has literally become a copy of their mother, at age sixteen, complete with Yui Ikari's hairstyle.

He's reasonably sure Mom didn't have that hairdo when she was his age. Although she did in the dream, which lends to the suggestion that Lilith was trolling him.

"We can take the elevator."

Zyuu's idea of a rescue involves them running through a series of corridors that run on a slight downward slant. Presumably this is an alternate method of getting to Sheol. Presumably this is also wrong, as

Mom would probably only have one method of access for getting to Sheol, as such a thing allows the Ree to set up turret defenses or something along those lines.

Why would the Ree have turret defenses?

Why *wouldn't* they have turret defenses? He's become convinced that the common explanation for every action taken by his murder of half sisters is 'It seemed like a good idea at the time.' Often, they seem to be carried upon by *good ideas.* So, Shinji believes, the idea of them going in a gradual spiral downwards is a better idea than them *taking an elevator.*

"Zyuu," he says.

He's never really talked with Zyuu outside of the dream, he realizes as she continues pulling him along. The signs indicate they're in an underground school now, or at least some unused part, with furniture in the hallway. He passes a table with a neat pile of PDAs on it, passing a swivel chair as Zyuu continues pulling him along.

"Zyuu," he repeats, "Please tell me why we're running."

"We have to rescue the third pilot!"

Huh. Is that Professor Fu's name on that door?

"But this doesn't explain why we're not taking a-"

Zyuu turns to Shinji, the look on her face one of tangential annoyance. Which quickly turns to worry, as her foot hooks on her other ankle, and she spins around on the soft pink slippers and slams her face into the door next to her. She moans as she collapses to the floor, pushing herself up. Red begins to trickle out of her nose, and she grabs at her face, looking at the red droplets, before screaming like she had just been stabbed.

...

"Huh. So, Mari can blast Rei halfway across the Wreck Room by looking at her funny. I take it we're *not* putting her in an Eva again?"

The video shows the final moments, as Misato and Yui watch from the hovering screen in her office. As Mari ducks under Rei's spin kick,

several diamonds flying out of Mari's back. They shine, red dots of light dancing over Rei's face and into her eyes, the nephilim blinded as Mari falls back, whips off her glasses, and gives off a cry that Yui has no doubt Rei taught her.

"*Optic BLAST!"*

Which sends Rei across the Wreck Room, into the far wall, and embedded into the sprint-mounted panels.

"Admittedly, yes," Yui responds, hands folded in front of her face, sitting at her desk, "Mari has an...admittedly spotty history with Evangelion piloting. While Rei tends to keep hers intact."

"Well, she's only piloted Unit-00-"

"Which has been decapitated and is still being repaired. If the debriefing from Uri and Shinji about the dream are any indication, her track record didn't improve."

Misato shrugs. In her mind, giving Unit-00 back to Rei makes the most sense, since they just finished vaporizing her other ride. Which is now her car. Somehow.

"Yeah, okay," she says, "So we have three experienced pilots, three backup pilots, an Eva to repair and make, I dunno, so it can transform into a tank so we can give it to Rei, a TRIDENT, and a Kill Sat."

Yui nods, and taps the console on her desk, the screen disappearing.

"Well," she says, "Ichi's back in the Mark-01's Core. She went to Germany to see Kei, which I do appreciate. Even if I did have to scold her for leaving without telling us. But, I do have a job for you, Misato."

Misato nods, folding her hands on her lap.

"Project E is still investigating just what the Angel did," Yui continues, "And we've found that there's a hot springs outside of Tokyo-3. Near Mount Asama, actually. It seems that they were awake for several weeks during the angel attack, and have memories of things that happened during the dream. I want you to go and investigate what happened."

"Sure," Misato says, "And I take Kaji, too."

Yui raises an eyebrow.

"Should I ask why?"

Misato sighs, shrugging.

"Let's just say that it's a good idea if he and I get some talking done," she says, "I'd take Ritsuko, but you probably need her here to help calibrate the new pilots with the Evas, and she and I are a little tense, now."

"Yes. I heard. With Go-kun being assigned as your Section 2 escort without you being told. He was happy to know that being Section 2 means he gets a salary."

Misato cocks an eyebrow.

"What does he need a salary for?"

"Online shopping, I suppose," Yui says, "So, this is what we know about the hot springs..."

...

"My blood! I'm dying! My crimson spilt in the dying of the light! *Le soleil de la Zyuu se couche, et il n'y aura pas d'aurore!"*

He's reasonably sure that isn't proper French. He remembers learning from her that she doesn't actually *know* French, but instead that she knows Google Translate and has memorized the code for it, so she can quickly translate whatever she wants, but with bad grammar. He does, however, know that she is heavier than the last time he had to carry her.

Given, he was a superhuman half-angel then, and she was also a superhuman half angel. It feels, though, that she's been going on a diet of lead weights since then. But he doesn't say any of this, because it would probably make Zyuu *more* hysterical.

If such a thing were possible.

"This is *pain! I don't like pain!* I need *my Mommy! Or someone maternal!"*

He is trying to ignore it. Zyuu's becoming disabled means he is now the leader, and standing with his sister cradled in his arms, he waits as

the elevator *dings* to announce its arrival.

"...so what you're saying is that you're a modified clone of Kihl, with Kyoko involved, and that means you're actually Mari's great-uncle?"

"You are aware Kihl is her great-grandfather, yes?"

"Seriously?"

"Why else do you think he lived on her estate?"

Shinji clears her throat. Pieter and Uri turn to him, as Shinji shifts slightly to better accommodate Zyuu's weight.

"So..." Pieter states.

"Sheol," Shinji says, "Let's go to Sheol."

...

Shinji Ikari is not unobservant. For example, he does register that Zyuu no longer smells of LCL and blood, but now of disinfectant, shampoo, and soap. In essence, she no longer smells like a *Ree,* but like a normal human. Who has spent the past few days in a hospital. He also notices how during the run, she started to go out of breath, or that her coordination is spotty. Meaning that what happened in the dream has most likely happened in reality.

And Zyuu is now human. But mostly, he notices that, upon entering Sheol itself, she seems to be a bit nervous as she walks alongside him, two wads of tissue in her nostrils, as they come across the lit, large gymnasium, and where they spot the third pilot, Kiri, and Hatchi.

More importantly, he sees Kiri practicing a kata, with Zyuu softly, silently walking around her in a circle. He and Pieter both wince as they see Hatchi's hand dart out and whack the girl upside the head, but she does not falter or even pause. Given, Hatchi hit her lightly- a love tap for someone of her physical power.

"Hatchi," Shinji says. Both girls turn to Shinji. Hatchi off handedly reaches out to whack Kiri, but thinks better of it.

"Hatchi, I'm going to count to ten," he says, "If you don't give Kiri back by then, I'm coming over there."

Hatchi shrugs, and pats Kiri on the shoulder.

"'Kay," she says, "I'll call you up tonight. Tell me how your synch test goes!"

Kiri nods, shoulders slumping slightly, and walks to the elevator, mouthing a thank you to Shinji. Hatchi sighs, walking over to a metal folding chair and slumps down.

"Hey," he says, "Uh...I'll be up soon."

Pieter shrugs, taps the floor button, and he and the others ascend. Leaving Shinji alone with her sister. Sighing, Shinji walks over, grabs a chair and pulls it over, sitting across from his sister.

"So," he says, "Hey...um...what were you doing?"

"Situational awareness," Hatchi says, pouting, "Distractions, field of view. Stuff."

Shinji nods. He can see the misery etched in Hatchi's face. From what they can tell, no one, outside of Uri and him remember the exacts, but there is a level of deja vu from the dream. Meaning Hatchi probably remembers, to some extent, being able to go outside without the threat of death or becoming a monster.

"So, Kiri's your friend?"

"Uh huh," Hatchi says, "She's my sidekick, too. I've been training her, for just in case..."

"In case you can ever go out," he finishes, "She'll be your sidekick, and you'll do all sorts of *stuff?"*

She nods. A smile pulls at her face. He reaches out, squeezing her shoulder. He remembers, in the dream, finally bonding with his sisters, becoming a part of their life. Not viewing them as odd people or things in the background, but real and true family.

No reason he can't do that here.

"So," he says, "Uh...situational awareness, right? So, like, knowing where a threat is coming from?"

Hatchi nods.

"That sounds pretty useful," he continues, "Could you teach me?"

A bright, wide smile breaks out on Hatchi's face, a sound like a squeal escaping her lips. From the sparkle in her eyes to the way her hands clasp together, he can tell he just made his sister's day with those words.

He couldn't, however, tell just how much he was going to *regret* that.

Not until much later.

Chapter 108: Hot Springs Episode

Tapping her pen on her desk, Yui Ikari stares at the floating screen. It's a relatively new addition- a holographic screen which acts as a larger monitor. New technology to make her life easier, which is one of the things that NERV develops which she considers the least damning. But that's the way progress works. First come the weapons, then come everything else. The Manhattan Project ushered in the nuclear bomb, which ended up nearly finishing the job that Second Impact started during the Impact Wars. But it also created nuclear power. The Space Race was a race to create ICBMs, which have held humanity under the specter of annihilation for her entire life. But it also lead to computers, microwaves, cell phones, and velcro.

The Eva project could save humanity or damn it. But it also leads to superintelligent computer cores, artificial intelligence, new branches of humanity, and a look at the greater universe.

Knuckles rap on the door, and she sees her son, in jeans and a sweatshirt rather than plugsuit, standing in the doorway.

"Shinji?"

"Hey, Mom," he says, "Just wanted to tell you, Hikari's managed to synch pretty well with the Mark-01. So Dr. Akagi wants to assign her as my backup pilot. Kiri's getting along well with Zwei, so it looks like Touji's riding shotgun with Rei."

Yui sucks her teeth.

"That poor boy," she says, and shrugs, "Well, Rei worked to get him and Hikari together, so it works out." She rolls her shoulders, stretching her arms with a yawn. "*Thank you* for helping with Zyuu. I didn't want her wandering around alone, so it's good that you found her. Also, thanks for helping with Hatchi and Kiri. Hatchi's been happier since you asked her to train you."

He nods with a grin, scratching the back of his head.

"Hey, what're big brothers for?" he asks, and winces, "So...Zyuu's human?"

"Happened in the dream, right?"

"Yeah," he responds, "Little differently, though. I still don't understand it, but hopefully Aunt Naoko left some notes."

Yui nods, and clicks off the monitor, folding her hands on her desk and leveling her gaze upon her son.

"So, how are you holding up?" she asks.

"Fine. Why?"

"I mean," she says, putting on her best *Mother* face, "About Asuka going to Germany with her father. You're not upset?"

He shakes his head.

"Nope. She wants to spend time with her Dad, she thinks it'll cheer up Kei, and she says she'll have a great time." He shrugs. "Why'd I be upset?"

Yui taps her fingers on the desk. She has no way to tactfully answer that. Except, of course, if she were tactless. i.e., '*Because you're having sex?*' But she does not say that, because a) they only did so twice, b) they're not underage even if they are minors, and c) they are being responsible about this as they only did this when they were 1) under the direct influence of Lilith and 2) after Shinji managed to cause Ichi to ascend to Godhood which probably gave him at least the sort of rush that she and Gendo had when they first stumbled upon the Room of Gauf seventeen years ago and oh wait Shinji's talking.

"I mean, look," he says, "We said the same thing to Misato. If Asuka and I can't spend two weeks apart, how are we going to get through *college?*"

She nods.

"Good point," she says, "So...how's Ichi getting along with her backup pilot?"

Chapter 77:

The Hot Springs Episode

The Zonda speeds along the highway, its top down, wind whipping her hair. Well, the top's down because she's not driving it at full speed, like she did during her race battle with Zophael. If she did that, the

wind would most likely destroy her face. Or hit her in the face with one of her boobs. But that's some stuff she doesn't try to do. In the passenger seat next to her, with a shave and a good night's sleep inside of him, Kaji has his ponytail clip in his hand and is letting the wind run havoc upon his hair, like a mane of black with some hints of silver and gray.

"So," he says, shouting to be heard over the wind and the engine, "What's the deal with this place?"

"They remember the whole dream," she responds, "Or at least a few weeks of it. So we're trying to find out why. Ritz things there's something weird about this place. Like a weird rhythmic pattern."

"Don't follow," Kaji responds.

"Me neither. So we're going to poke around."

The gear shifts, the speed picking up as the car zooms down the highway. Kaji clears his throat.

"So, I woke up in a room with a sulky four year old AI who complained about everything being disgusting, stupid, or stupidly disgusting," he says as a conversation starter, "And occasionally as disgustingly stupid, too."

"And Ritsuko put an AI in my car because she doesn't think I'm ever sober," she responds with a sigh, pulling the car into a turn, "I still can't believe she did that. And my two sixteen year old wards have a healthier relationship than we ever did. So."

"So."

They both sigh. The car accelerates out of the turn, passing two green JSSDF cargo haulers, though both passengers remain silent, until,

"We really should talk."

...

Shinji looks over his PDA, standing in the elevator. He isn't sure what he's reading. It could be the first draft of a dry and technical scifi story Asuka would try to get him to read, but no. It apparently is the readings that the three new pilots got when they first synched with

their Evas. Not his first choice, but Mom insisted he keeps up to date on people who he might be riding with.

He just wishes that this wasn't written by people with a sum total of nine PhD's to their name.

Hikari apparently scored the highest, at 41%, but he is pretty sure that Hikari has the need to be better than other people. Touji practically confirmed this, if not for his very reasonable fear of Rei defending Hikari's honor.

Kiri, Hatchi's friend, got 33%, soundly beating Touji's 28%. He's going to be competitive about this, but his synch ratio is probably better than Mana's. But he won't say that, because if he did, Mana would kick his balls up to his nose. Now that he has no longer has a Nephilim healing factor, that's probably not something he needs to try.

The elevator cab opens with a ding, and he looks up and meets the eyes behind a pair of amber glasses. Gendo nods, steps into the elevator, and stands beside his son.

"What floor?" Shinji asks.

"Project E," Gendo responds. Shinji nods. That's his destination, too. Tapping the button, Shinji taps his PDA shut and pockets it. Best to not do anything to draw too much commentary, as his mother's commentary is awkward enough and-

"So," Gendo says, "You and Asuka."

Shinji sighs, staring straight ahead. He should have expected this. He never got this in the Dream, but Mom wasn't giving him the motherly guilt/emotional castration treatment in the dream, either, so reality just had to decide that it has to suck for him.

"Yeah," he says.

"Yes," Gendo says, "Good work, Shinji."

Shinji cocks an eyebrow, turning to his father.

"*What.*"

"Your mother is somewhat...prudish when it comes to the children," Gendo explains, displaying his knack for being oddly analytical at

exactly the wrong times, "She seems to be mortified of the possibility that Kei and Nagisa will have sex before they are married, have PhDs, and hold responsible positions in NERV or major universities. Given, we are unsure *how* nephilim reproduce. We have theories. I have put money into shotgun method."

Shinji says nothing. He can say nothing, as he is trying to figure out what his father just said.

"But in any case," Gendo responds, "You and Asuka did wait. So, you beat your mother and I."

The corner of his mouth twitches. Should he ask? Does he want to know? Does he dare inquire?

"By how much?" he asks.

"Five months."

Shinji takes a step away, an expression that mixes fear, surprise, and dumbstruck horror plastered on his face. Well, he thinks, that's something he never needed to know.

...

The woman is old. There is no description more apt than old. Her hunching over gives her the impression of being about three feet tall, her high pitched, squeaky voice more resembling a tortured cat than a human. But, she owns the onsen, so they have to deal with her.

"Well, it was kind of strange, because we usually got a lot of customers during those months," she says, leading Misato and Kaji into the large wood house, "The news are saying that the whole thing was from an Angel. Is that right?"

Misato sighs, nodding in affirmation and leaning on a nearby table. She glances over at Kaji and he shrugs at her openness.

Misato straightens up, rubbing the back of her neck. "Um...maybe?" Misato responds.

"Oh, don't be coy, dear," the old woman says with a smirk, "You're on the news all the time. You're from NERV. Just because I'm old doesn't mean I don't know how to use Google."

After a pause, the old woman totters over to another task, leaving the two alone.

"Was this supposed to be an undercover mission?" Kaji asks.

Misato shrugs.

"Hell if I know," she says as the old woman walks back over, "Well, that saves us dancing around crap. Is there anything really, really strange that's been happening over the past, say, six months?"

The old woman taps her lip, her lips going to a straight line as her wrinkles align to a furrowed brow.

"Well," she says, pointing past them and to the mountain in the distance, "Mount Asama started rumbling about five months ago, like it was going to blow. But it never did. I guess if you want to find out anything, it would start over there."

...

Clearing her throat, Mana waits as the door opens. Changed from her school clothes to her beige NERV uniform, she looks down momentarily. The pants of the uniform are loose, comfortable. She never wears the skirt. Too girly.

The door opens, sliding into the wall, and Mana finds herself in a familiar environment. Back at NHIS's Chicago facilities, she would often find herself in a similar office, and it feels...well, good, to know that he's made himself at home in NERV. The left wall has a large, framed picture of the blueprints for Jet Alone Prime, with small pictures of Jet Alones 1-5 next to it. She's pretty sure she had to destroy JA-4 in New Vegas, but the others are probably still intact.

The other wall has a TRIDENT blueprint on it, and pictures of him and Mana, standing in front of Prime's head. Which brings back a pang of guilt to her. Yes, it was only a machine, and it was too damaged to bring with them after the Vegas clusterfuck, but JAP was still *her* machine. At least the AI was still intact.

"Hello, Mana," Shiro Tokita says, sipping from a metal coffee mug as a holographic screen hovers in front of him, "How've you been?"

"Nothing to complain about," she says with a shrug, "You needed to

see me?"

"Mm. I'm modifying the TRIDENT to hold a Pilot Ball at the center of its mass," he says, "And we're going to be putting Evangelion-type skin at strategic points to give it a sort of AT-field shield. And I've agreed, with reservation, to have Dr. Sohryu run Synthesis on the TRIDENT so it has an Evangelion-type AI."

She nods, straightening up.

"Reservations?"

Tokita sighs, sipping his coffee.

"Because I've figured out why your synch ratio sucks with JA-Tan," he says, "And here's why:"

...

The screen of the PDA flashes, and becomes a bright white light, illuminating the darkness of the cave as Misato leads, taking the pistol out of her jacket and keeping her finger on the safety. Waving the impromptu flashlight, she squints in the illuminated corridor of rock, thumbing the button on the PDA's side as the earpiece in her right ear clicks with a blue light.

"Nothing so far. How's it from your end?"

In the next cave over, Kaji holds his pistol in one hand, PDA in the other and on top of it, slowly making his way into the depths.

"Nothing so far. I am noticing, however, that the rocks look a lot smoother than they should for a large, old volcano."

Misato nods, running the back of her hand over the rock, noticing the glassy, smooth feel.

"Yeah," she says, "Yeah, you're right. I mean, this is common for shield type basalt, but it shouldn't be in tubes. So, what do you think? Angel?"

"No blue pattern," Kaji responds, squinting, slowly making his way down the cafe as he tilts his head, "When'd you learn geoscience?"

"NERV didn't hire me just to watch my tits jiggle," Misato responds

with a smirk.

Kaji is silent for a moment, trying to figure out a response that would not get him smacked through his bluetooth.

"Wait," he says, "Katsuragi, I'm hearing something up ahead. Like a clicking."

In her own cave, Misato grimaces.

"Same. Hold on. There seems to be some sort of clearing up ahead."

A flicker up ahead as Misato moves forward, thumbing the safety of her pistol as the black glass gives way to a lit room. A thing on the ceiling, like a flower of yellow and green with a light bulb at the center, illuminates the room. Misato tilts her head at it, blinking, and turns as Kaji enters from another entrance.

"Huh," he says, "That's new."

Underneath the flower, there is a sphere. It is mottled red, held on three legs which seem to start in either the ground or the egg, allowing it to stand at the exact center of the room. The room is warm, humid, and Misato stares at the red ball as Kaji takes out his PDA and taps a command.

"Yeah, it's Kaji," he says, "We've found something weird here in Asama. Sending a picture now."

He clicks the lens, a photo of the ball appearing on his PDA as it's sent to the contacts at NERV. And no sooner is it sent than the projector on the PDA comes to life and a hologram of a floating flatfish appears.

"Junior?" Misato asks, "You recognize this?"

"**Yes,**" Junior says, "**Yes, I do. That is a Sandalim Egg.**"

...

Tokyo-3 International Airport is on the northern side of Tokyo-3. The airport itself has the specialized armor which forms into a dome around the building itself, with the runway sinking into the armor layers. Despite the massive damage done to the city by Go-kun's possessed rampage and the assault of Zeruel, neither the building or the runway have sustained any significant damage.

It is as they enter the Departures area that Shinji actually appreciates the décor of the airport. Everything is white or clear. White floors, white desks, white tables and benches. The departure area is made of multiple areas. There is a second, third, and fourth floor, also white, with escalators and slanted walkways leading up to them. And small dips in the clear, waist high walls.

"Sniper positions," Uri says, next to him.

Shinji turns to him, cocking his head.

"What?"

"Those are mounts for sniper rifles," Uri says, "They're sniper positions. The airport can be converted into a military installation and fort at the drop of a hat. It's designed for it. The runway is wide enough for cargo planes, and the three main runways, side to side, are large enough to taxi an Evangelion-scale air carrier."

Kyoko sighs, hands on their shoulders and pushing them past the entrance doors and into the airport proper.

"Yes, Uri," she says, "We know that Tokyo-3 is a military town. No need to constantly point out Ikari's own ignorance to him."

Kyoko walks past them, towards where Asuka and Pieter are standing, their suitcases loaded onto a cart by a grey uniformed NERV officer and a small army of Section 2. Shinji waves back to his girlfriend, as Uri smiles to her.

"So," Uri says, as Kyoko begins fussing over Asuka, "How did your test go?"

"Hikari can't stop squeeing over how cute my sixty meter tall cyborg little sister is," Shinji responds, "You?"

"Kiri, Ayanami's friend," Uri responds, "She stammered out that she is in no way attracted to me. I find that refreshing. Also, she stammers much like Asuka does, so Zwei seems to like her."

"And Hikari had to...well..."

Cage 03:

Hikari squeals in the Entry Plug.

Cage 06:

"S-so it thinks it's a d-dog?" Kiri asks, "That's...um...nice."

She looks at herself in the plugsuit. Then turns and looks at Uri, who has his hands folded in his lap.

"Um...I...uh...I just want to make things clear but...well, I'...um...don't find you attractive at all even if every other girl in the school does."

Cage 01:

"Oh god oh god oh god oh god-"

"Yeah," Shinji says, "Touji didn't take the idea that he's Rei's copilot too well, did he?"

"Lots of stammering. And crying," Uri says, "Something about a plucked chicken. Might be an interesting story."

"Was amusing watching Hikari warn JA-Tan off of hitting on Touji, too."

Uri sips his canned coffee. Shinji thrusts his hands into his pockets. Looking over, he smiles over to Asuka, who waves him and Uri over. Nodding, Shinji walks over, stopping as a blonde boy nearly walks into him, the pale boy looking at him before a pale woman walks over and pulls him back over to the luggage cart. The woman smiles at Shinji, adjusting her yellow scarf, and walks away, pulling the cart with her.

"Huh," he says.

"Odd," Uri adds, "I thought mine was the only german family here."

Shinji shrugs, and continues walking.

"So," Uri says, "Why is Doctor Ikari not here? I would figure she would want to see Asuka off."

"She wanted to," Shinji responds, passing the german family, who he notices to include a daughter as well, "But Mom had something she had to do today."

...

The advantage of being the head of Project E is that Yui Ikari does not have to wear those damn NERV uniforms when she's on official business. The red turtleneck and khaki skirt does the job, as well as the jacket with the red fig leaf for appearances. The NERV insignia is more for Section 2's benefit than anything else, allowing them to track her when necessary.

The woman at the desk in the classroom is only about five years older than Yui. Long black hair with only the lightest hints of gray, dressed in a white blouse and black long skirt. She adjusts her glasses as Yui enters, and smiles, motioning her in.

"Doctor Ikari," she says.

"Miss Kim," Yui says, walking over, shaking both her hands with a smile, "It's good to see you again."

"Same, same," the first grade teacher at Tokyo-3 Elementary School says, "How's Rei?"

"Fine. Fine." Yui smiles. "She's fine. Long story. Anyway, I wanted to ask you about enrolling a new student. She's really sweet, very smart, and I think she could really use some exposure to some children her age."

Yui reaches into her bag, taking out a folder, and opening it to reveal a profile with a smiling, 6 year old face framed by chocolate brown hair.

"This is Ichi," Yui says, "My daughter."

...

Shinji notices that every time he and Asuka kiss at the airport, Uri twitches. Just to test the theory, he lets Asuka's hand wrap around his, and he wraps an arm around her shoulder. Looking over his shoulder, he sees Uri twitch again.

"U-Uri?" Asuka asks, "Have you been having t-too many of those canned coffees? B-because you look a little jumpy."

Ahead of them, her hand intertwined with Pieter's, Kyoko allows herself a small smirk as she observes the continuing rivalry between her son and Ikari.

"I will miss you," she says.

"So will I," Pieter responds, clad in his white dress NERV uniform, his small collection of medals jiggling with every step.

"The hitmen I hired to murder you if you stray, however, won't. Especially if you give them time for a second shot."

Pieter sighs. A long suffering sigh.

"Not the best thing to say in an airport, dear," he sighs, swinging their hands back and forth.

"Oh, don't worry," Kyoko says, patting his hand, "They're Section 2."

He sighs again. He is often unsure just on what level his ex-wife is joking about this sort of thing. Given, if he cheated on her, he'd be more likely to hurt *himself* as much as have Kyoko do the dirty work. Still, he muses, it's the thought that counts.

"No need to worry about me," Pieter says, taking both her hands, turning her to him, "You'll be okay? I mean, with me and Asuka in Berlin?"

She shrugs, a small smirk on her face.

"It will give me time to focus on Uri and Zwei," she says, "I am sure Zwei would do well from some motherly attention. My other children, for lack of my own efforts, all seem to be well settled."

He blinks.

"I thought Zwei kind of thought he was a dog."

Kyoko rolls her eyes. She has tried to explain complex AI personality issues to her ex-husband. He smiles and nods when she does so, and then they proceed to things he enjoys. Perhaps their relationship is built on a complete disinterest of what they do at their jobs.

"I'm sure you'll have a great time," Shinji says, thumbs rubbing over Asuka's knuckles as they stand at the departure gate, the white gate and white carpeted floor already black with marks from the carts, "Send me pictures."

She nods, pecking him on the cheek. Uri twitches.

"Okay," she says, "Also, c-could you do me a favor?"

He nods, as a bald man in dark sunglasses and a beige suit walks by, his white macbook under his arm as he hands his boarding pass to the gate attendant.

"Spend some time with Mari," she says, and places her finger on Shinji's lips to keep him from complaining, "I m-mean it. She's g-going to miss me, even if she doesn't say it. So she could use a friend."

He nods, smiling.

"Okay," he says, "I think Uri wants to say goodbye, too."

She smiles, and walks to her brother, pulling him into a hug. He says nothing, patting her on the back, eyes closed as they embrace, brother and sister. She pats him on the back, resting her chin on his shoulder.

"Have fun," he says, barely audible to anyone but Asuka.

"I will," she responds, and kisses him on the cheek.

Waving, Asuka and Pieter walk through the gate, into the tunnel leading to the plane itself. Hands in his pockets, Shinji watches them go, Uri next to him. Neither makes any motion. Nothing like a manly, brotherly slap on the back. Uri, instead, avoids looking at Ikari at all.

"So," Shinji says.

Uri grunts.

"We already had our fistfight in the dream," Shinji says, "So...we're not going to have to have one here, right?"

"Our having a fistfight doesn't change how I think of you," Uri says, folding his arms, "I still think you're an idiot."

"And I still think you're an ass."

"And I think you both are too much like each other to not hate each other," Kyoko interjects, stepping between the two and grabbing them by the arms, "Let's go. The faster we get you two in a synch test with your copilots, the sooner I don't have to tell Asuka about your *dueling egos."*

...

"So, JA-Tan and I weren't getting along because of Dueling OS's?"

At his desk, Tokita nods to Mana, the holographic screen floating behind him with the diagram of Jet Alone Prime's AI core disassembled in virtual.

"Exactly," he responds, as he clicks a button and synchronization scores pop up. Mana's, in particular. "Mana, you weren't just Prime's pilot, you were the Operating System. And when Sohryu somehow *magically uplifted* your memories into it's own *sentience*, that also became an OS, as well."

Mana nods. She is sure that, somehow, that made sense. Somehow.

"So...you have a solution?"

Tokita smiles. The same cocky, sure smile. With a bit of manic grin behind it.

"Mana, I *designed* JAP and the TRIDENTs. Of *course* I have a solution. We're going to install *boot camp*."

...

After much questioning of their floating flatfish guest, it was figured out that the egg could be safely transported into the back seat of her Zonda, as long as there was a wet towel put on it. Which, thinking back on it, makes no sense. Submerged up to her nose, blowing bubbles in the hot bath, the stars overhead, Misato cocks an eyebrow as she tries to consider how stupid that chain of events were. A wet towel helps in the gestation of an alien life-seed.

Riiiight.

Then again, she muses, everything about Wuffles is good and messed up. He eats beer cans and gargles out beer. He has a closet inside his spleen. He has his genitals inside his mouth, past a cave of razor knives of stabby.

Sitting up in the bath, she takes another sip of sake. Thinking about Sandalim makes her need to drink.

Another plume of bubbles as she dips into the water, her hair floating around her half submerged face. At least the owner of the onsen let them stay for free. Even if they haven't figured out *why* the town was awake for most of the attack. They need to step up on that.

Tomorrow.

"Hey, Katsuragi."

She submerges herself completely, and sits up, turning in the bath and propping her elbows up, turning to the shoulder high fence that divides the mens and womens baths. Leaning on the fence, Kaji waves, best lady killer smile on his face. Which works, too an extent, on women who don't know what a two-timing douchebag he is.

"How about a backrub?" Kaji asks.

"How about I kick your ass?" she responds, maybe a bit too chipper.

He blanches as she climbs out, shaky, her towel wrapped around her chest. Leaning against the wall, she watches him squirm.

"So," he says.

"So," she responds, "We gotta case the joint."

He snickers, leaning on the wall, a well toned arm laying across the fence.

"Case the joint?" he asks, "Leave the noir to me, Katsuragi. I *know* what I'm doing with that."

She snorts, slapping him on the arm.

"Then explain to me how, o *super spy,* how you ended up locked in a room with a 4 year old girl."

"Four year old *AI,"* he mutters, "And she didn't know, either." He shudders. "I never want children. Not if they turn out like *that*."

She snorts again, slapping him on the arm again.

"Yeah, that'll happen."

He narrows his eyes. A twitch in his lip and a movement of his adam's apple, and he drapes both arms over his side of the fence.

"And what does that mean?" he asks, and sighs, "Oh, *right.* The endless 'fear of commitment' crap that we love to parade in front of me."

"Ain't crap if it's true," Misato sing songs, sipping another saucer of sake, "You and I are a special sort of screwed up."

It's Kaji's turn to snort this time, pouring himself a saucer and downing it.

"What?" he asks, "Now *you* want a commitment?"

"Better late than never, Kaji," she responds, leaning on the fence, tipping her sake bottle back and forth, "I mean, it's like you're already a Dad."

"Mana's not my daughter."

"Coulda fooled me. Takes a special kinda guy to dunk Tokita's head in a toilet."

He snorts with a smile.

"Yeah," he says, "I guess I'm not the same jackass I was in college, am I?"

"I'm not the same flirty maniac I was in college, either," she responds, patting his hand, "I mean, I've had a good year. Got responsible. Cutting back on my drinking. Shot God in the face with a giant laser cannon."

"Good year," Kaji admits, leaning in, thumbs running over her knuckles. She tries to think of a way to continue the arguments and the snark. But can't really think of a way to do so. Instead, he goes with the flow, leaning in, ready to see what happens next.

Although, what happens next is a red glow which bathes the onsen, reflecting crimson light over them, the shoulder high fence, the water, and the rocks they are standing on. Slowly, the two look up.

A red sphere, hovering over the hot springs, hovering over the down, floating upon a oscillating field of gold and crimson. At the center of the sphere, the red circles widen and open to reveal a yellow rimmed, black eye which stares down upon them. And narrows.

...

...

...

Upon this Base Earth grew a tree

A Tree of Life, grown tall and free

Upon its branches in radiant white

Grew I, and I, as is my right,

Declared by ADAM-given selfhood call,

In crimson light and blood toned pall.

And in mists of red and gold was I

As I drifted through the clear blue sky

And raised my majesty to heavens high.

I viewed this Base Earth from above,

To watch the life with awe and love,

To view the living and the wild

To view the cycles of death and childe.

And kith and kin in wondrous awe,

Gazed upon me in passing,

And gave a roar;

"Behold! Behold! Her passing light!

Built 'pon this world's glorious right!

Pleased is He Who is Called 'I AM's' sight."

My time had passed, my purpose filled,

It was the time for my soul t'be stilled,

For Father to reclaim us, daughter and all,

And to return us to the White Seed's call.

When the Mother and Maker did seek us four,

To tell us that we could be much more.

And so I have slept, in ages past,

As the Lilim spread, their ways so fast,

But I rise,

I rise,

Like my brothers of Thunder and Starlight,

And I am quite surprised.

I am just curious and wondrous,

And mean quite well.

For I am the Angel of Love.

Anael.

Chapter 109: Burning Fist of Love

Staring up at the floating crimson orb, they pull their views back and make out the shape a little better. It is almost as big as an Evangelion- as in, an Evangelion could almost fit inside it, and definitely could if it curled into a ball. It is a perfect sphere, crimson with hints of gold, the many layers of its skin oscillating and shifting as it floats, revealing the cat slit eye the size of a small house at the center that is staring at them.

Past that, it has seven white, silver feathered wings are equidistant points around its body, each one fluttering slightly as it rotates, watching with idle curiosity and they hastily throw on their clothes and run out of the onsen, Misato screaming for Kaji to haul ass.

Which is also when the Zonda drives up to them, doors popping open and the egg rolling around the back seat.

"**Jesus Christ it's an angel,**" Go-kun shouts, "**Get in the car!**"

Needing no more prompt, Misato and Kaji climb in, the clutch shifting to drive and the car speeding down the road. Kaji stares at the stereo, which now has a screen with a single vibrating red line at its center, as Misato yanks out her phone and taps in a number.

"Yui! It's Katsuragi! So, the good news is, Kaji and I have figured out why that town wasn't affected by the dream! The bad news is *that it's fucking right behind us!"*

Chapter 78:

Burning Fist of Love

Jaws hang in Central Dogma as they watch the red, winged ball plow into and through the top of a mountain, in steady pursuit of Katsuragi's car. Save for Gendo, who sits at the desk at the top of Dogma, hands steepled in front of him.

"Blue Pattern confirmed," Maya announces, "Readings are different from a normal Angel or Cherubim, though."

A hum, and the projector behind the three bridge bunnies comes to life, Yui taking a step back as Junior's image appears.

If I may interject, Lieutenant Ibuki, that is because this is a different type of Angel. Her name is Anael. And she is a Grigori.

Yui cocks an eyebrow, folding her arms as Kyoko enters Dogma.

"A Grigori?" she asks, "I'm not sure I understand."

Grigori are impossibly ancient creatures. They were created by Father not as warriors or destroyers, but as observers and scouts. While Archangels are created by the Pain of Father, and Cherubim are created by the Rage of Father, Grigori are created by His Curiosity.

Yui nods, cocking her head towards Kyoko as she walks up next to her.

"Status?"

"The Evangelions are still outside Tokyo-3 on a live exercise," Sohryu responds, shaking her head, "We don't have time to remove the backup pilots, switch to the single seat plugs, and still intercept the Angel before it reaches Tokyo-3. I figure this is as good a chance as any to observe the dual synching in action."

Yui nods.

"Okay," she says, "Pilots! Let's see if we can capture this one! Prepare to intercept!"

...

"Okay," Kaji yells, looking over his shoulder to find the gigantic red ball still in pursuit, "Go-kun, *you're* Misato's new car?"

"**That is correct. I am remote controlling the car with Miss Katsuragi's assistance. I can, however, multitask so we can hold this conversation while we evasively drive.**"

Behind them, two of the wings drag into the ground, grinding up the asphalt behind them as Misato screams. A dip, and the Angel rises again, floating directly above the car.

"That's not good," Kaji says, "Must go faster. Must go faster. Go go go go *go!*"

"Shut up!" Misato yells, "Go-kun! Don't you have weapons?"

"**No, this avatar body is, unfortunately, unarmed.**"

"What do you mean you don't have weapons?" Misato screams, "I thought the *Ree* modified you!"

Under a low bridge the car speeds, girders passing over a few meters above their heads. And as they pass the bridge, the entire bridge disintegrates explosively as Anael crashes through, the absent minded pursuit of the Angel giving no heed to such paltry obstacles as bridges and roads. Kaji shrieks in a particularly unmanly fashion as chunks of rubble and metal impact the road right behind them.

"**That would be besides the point, Miss Katsuragi. This is only an avatar body, not an evangelion, and therefor unable to create or deploy an AT Field.**"

"That didn't stop you with Zeruel!" Kaji yells, as gravel peppers the trunk of the car.

"**I will remind you that I was sixty meters tall, had plasma cannons, and an S2 engine then. Right now, I'm a car,**" Go-kun says, sharper, as the car swerves to avoid a girder which spears the road in front of them, "**Oh, and I will remind you as well that worked out so well then, too, outside of Zeruel *blasting my legs off*.**"

The pedal presses down, a plume of flame shooting out of the Zonda's exhaust as it accelerates down the road. Bouncing through the air behind them, Anael keeps pace with relaxed ease, spinning with her eye still focused on the car and the people within. Or at least, until the ground shakes.

A purple foot steps past the car, and the Mark-01 growls as it clears the mountains, charging at the Angel.

"Misato, get clear!" Shinji yells, Hikari screaming behind him as she holds onto the armrests, "This is the Mark-01! We're engaging the Angel-"

Which is when Anael plows straight through the Mark-01, still in pursuit of the car.

The other Evangelions clear the horizon, Unit-00 hefting up an Evangelion-scale chaingun an aiming it at the Grigori. Both

progressive knives drawn, Zwei charges towards Anael, all three Evangelions extending glowing walls of light towards the red sphere.

And then the wings spin, and the air around Anael glows red and white.

...

"What was that?" Yui asks, "What the Hell was that?"

"Angel's giving off some sort of Anti-AT Field," Makoto reports, "Uh...no change in vitals for any of the pilots!"

Kyoko and Yui turn to each other, shrugging, as Ritsuko walks over to Maya's station. A quick, quiet discussion between the two, and Akagi turns back to the two heads of project E.

"It seems to be some sort of defensive field," she says, "It's disabling the Evangelions and interacting with their AT Fields. It looks like it did this right when the Evangelions deployed their AT Fields."

Yui nods.

"So, not like Lilith's Anti-AT Field," she says, "But to what effect?"

...

The three Evangelions freeze. In Unit-02, Uri winces, squirming in his seat. Behind him, Kiri twiddles her thumbs, looking from side to side as the sound of Zwei's breathing becomes louder and louder.

In the Mark-01, the entire Evangelion goes silent, the Mark-01 falling to a kneeling position.

"Uh...huh," Shinji says, "Ichi? Are you alright?"

"*No!"* the voice shouts, "*That feels weird! Take over, older me!"*

And in Unit-00, Touji looks from side to side as he hears giggling from the seat immediately in front of him.

"...Rei?" he asks.

In the main pilot seat, hands on the controls, Rei smiles from ear to ear.

"I feel the need!" she shouts, "The need!"

And her head turns a full one hundred and eighty degrees to stare at Touji with glowing red eyes.

"**To breed.**"

...

The red sphere shimmers, seemingly dissolving into a cloud of crimson and gold. A flash, the material folding in upon itself, into a single point as a sphere of golden light forms around it, and the Angel is gone.

"What was that?" Yui demands, "Report!"

"Angel's just...disappeared," Aoba reports, the long haired bridge lieutenant looking between the Big Screen and the console in front of him, "MAGI read a massive AT Field spike right before it disappeared. MAGI believes it has the ability to cloak!"

"AT Field was the highest density on record outside of ADAM," Maya adds, "It was blocking light, radiation, particles! We can't find the Angel!"

"Recall the Evangelions," Yui orders, "Pilots! Report!"

Shinji's face is one of dumbstruck shock. Uri is squirming in his seat, visibly uncomfortable. And the seat for Unit-00 is empty. The silence is broken by the ear-splitting, horrifying scream.

Alarms blare, and the back of Unit-00's neck shoots off before the entry plug fires out like a bullet, streaking through the air before skipping across the lake next to Tokyo-3 and hitting the automated retrieval boat, sinking it.

"Premature ejection?" Akagi asks.

Yui sighs, nodding.

"We need to talk to Touji about that."

"*Mom?"* Shinji asks, "*You need to set up a VR link with Ichi's Core. Right now."*

...

"The AT field affected me," Uri says, wiping the LCL from his damp hair as he paces in front of the monitor, standing in the nondescript, white room, "So, since I am affected due to being an Angel, I am consigning myself to the modular rooms until it can be determined I am not compromised. I hope Miss Kiri didn't mind piloting Zwei back to the Cages herself."

"*I see,*" Kyoko says, her face on the monitor, sitting in her office, "*Isn't this the same room you and Ikari were consigned to in the dream world?"*

"By Asuka, after we got into a fist fight, yes," he explains, and sighs, "I figure the rooms, as they are on rails, can be moved deeper in NERV if I show signs of being controlled by the Angel. What has Junior said?"

"*That there is a difference between 'not hostile' and 'not dangerous'. We're still trying to figure out where the Angel is and what she wanted. We'll let you know what we find out."*

The screen blinks out, leaving Uri as he sits on the bedroll, crosses his legs, and closes his eyes to meditate.

...

Activating VR Link.

Participants: Ikari, Shinji; Ikari, Ichi; Ikari, Yui.

Environment: NERVia.

The world fades into a castle courtyard, white and gold stones as high as the eyes can see. Two people appear at first. Shinji quickly looks around, face set and unreadable. Yui appears almost ghostlike, only her hands and face fully coherent in the world around them.

"I couldn't get an immersion tube prepped in time," Yui explains, "So I'm just using a VR interface. Shinji, what's wrong?"

"I'll show you," Shinji responds, "Ichi! Get out here!"

Two forms shimmer into existence. One is the normal, six year old Ichi, shifting from side to side with an embarrassed look on her face. Shimmering into existence next to her is also Ichi. Twelve years old, her black hair tied into two long pigtails, shifting from one foot to the other as Shinji marches to her.

"Okay, wait," she says, "I can explain-"

Her protests and explanations are silenced as Shinji pulls her into a hug, crushing her against him as Ichi watches with a wide smile.

"I," Yui says, "I...wait, Shinji, what happened?"

Releasing Ichi, he holds her at arms length, a genuine, toothy grin on his face.

"Okay," he says, "*How?* I thought, when the dream ended, that you were *gone.*"

Ichi, the older Ichi, shrugs.

"Hey," she says, "Like I told you. I'm a *God.*"

...

Clad in her orange and black plugsuit, Hikari's face is a mix of worry and anger as the retrieved plug is open and Rei hops out. Whistling, Rei skips over to Hikari, landing on both feet and lolling back and forth.

"Rei," Hikari starts, "Did you...to Touji?"

Rei steps back, hands in front of her, as if to ward off the accusations via looking hurt. Or by using her AT Field.

"Oh, no!" she says, "I'd never do that!"

Hikari nods, shoulders relaxing.

"Good, because I-"

"That would interfere with my master plan!" Rei continues, "Because if I made Touji cheat on you, I'd have to pair up another pair of friends!"

Hikari tilts her head. Rei takes this as a sign to continue, even as the

other workers in the hangar stop to watch.

"Wee~ell," Rei continues, "I paired up you and Touji so you'd have **babies** and I would ship your **babies** with Shinji and Asuka's **babies**for ***MOAR BABIES."***

Rei tilts her head, smiling.

"'Kay?"

Hikari slowly nods. As does the rest of the staff, as a pale white Touji is helped out of the plug.

"Aaa~anyway, I gotta go down and cordon myself off in the testing rooms!" Rei says, skipping past Hikari, "Gotta follow procedures! And stuff! And junk! And protocaaaaaaaaaaal-"

And Rei disappears through the hangar doors.

...

A knock. Uri ends his meditation and walks across the room, pulling tighter the cord of the sweatpants that are his sole article of clothing, and opens the door. Still clad in her plugsuit, smile open and toothy, Rei meets his eyes. Quickly ascertaining the circumstances behind this situation, Uri shuts the door.

"Oh dear," he says. Rei can create an AT field. She was piloting an Evangelion and was within the blast radius of the Angel's attack.

This is very bad.

He walks across the room to the exit door on the other side and opens it. Rei stands in the doorway before him, and without hesitation, he slams the door shut again. Walking over to the monitor, he clicks it on, folding out the controls underneath it to open a line to Central Dogma and hopefully Mother.

Which is when the pale fist bursts through the door, feeling around before seizing the latch and unlocking it. Eyes wide, frozen in place by something he would later realize is terror, he watches as Rei opens the door...and smiles, narrowing her eyes upon him.

"Ayanami," he says, "What...what are you doing? What do you want?"

"***Babies."***

Her voice comes in reverb, deeper and more alien than it should be. She stalks towards him, and in reflex he extends his hand, a sword of molten orange light appearing in his hand, which he waves in front of him.

"Ooooh," Rei purrs, "Big swooooord."

Her eyes flash, and his sword breaks, hanging in front of him.

"Ayanami," he says, slowly backing away, grabbing his shirt from the bedroll and pulling it on, "This...this isn't a good idea! I remember reading this in books! The man is supposed to initiate things like this! You're not the man!"

Rei smiles wider, hands unclenched, fingers curled like claws.

"You'll be the man," she purrs, "*I'll be the Rei."*

...

"Well," the twelve year old Ichi says, "Since I'm sort of the lower half of Lilith, I'm kind of immune to Arael stabbing us in the brains. So, I sort of came into existence *in* the dream, and sort of went dormant when the dream ended until I started talking with Lil'Me after Shinji beat up Gothulhu."

She lolls back and forth on her feet.

"Sort of."

She smiles, almost a mirror to the relieved smile on Shinji's face, who is sitting on a stone bench in the virtual world with the six year old Ichi next to her, arm wrapped around his littler sister's shoulders.

Yui, on the other hand, is standing and listening to the twelve year old Ichi explain the reasons for her existence. Which, Shinji muses, has to be something along the weird side.

"So, I don't understand," Yui says, arms folded, gaze alternating between the two different versions of her daughter, "I...you said you're a God?"

"Ascended Lilithian life form, S2 organ from an Angel, full realization

of my latent power," Teen!Ichi says, flexing her arms with a smirk, "Well, in the Dream Arael was messing with what I could do, so all I could do was teleport, fly, and blast Tamiel in the face. Now, I'm pretty much the Super Eva. I mean, I smacked the living *crap* out of Gothulhu, didn't I?"

"Arguably, I had something to do with that," Shinji says.

"Me, too," Little Ichi adds.

"Anyway," Teen!Ichi continues, scratching her head, "Lil'Me called me out because the Angel hit us with a yucky stuff beam, and it wasn't fun. But I didn't get affected. So, I'm kinda curious if Third Me got hit by it, instead."

Yui cocks an eyebrow. And she purses her lips as the ground shakes, shuddering, the water in the fountain rippling.

"Third. Me." Yui says.

The teenage Ichi shifts back and forth on her feet.

"Well, since I'm a God, I'm also a Trinity," she says, "So I'm Ichi the Cute," she gestures at the six year old, who waves, as Shinji looks past his mother with eyes as wide as saucers, "Ichi the Brat," the teenager points to herself, and points to past Yui, "And Ichi the God Machine."

Yui turns. Overshadowing them, hissing steam from the vents on either size of its featureless, mask like face, colored purple and green by what is apparently marker and paint, the Beast looks down on them.

"So, yeah," Ichi says, "We figured out what his deal was. It's kind of cool."

...

Backing away, hands in front of him, Uri carefully keeps his eyes on Rei as she slowly walks towards him, matching his pace as he circles the room. She is smiling, teeth showing, eyes narrowed on him, as he clears his throat and tries to make a beeline to the door.

"Sempai!" Maya announces, eyes focused on the console in front of

her, two floors above, "I'm reading two AT Fields in the Detox rooms! Uri and Rei have both activated their S2 organs!"

"Ayanami," he says, "We're not in our right minds, and we really should consider that the Angel has unduly effected our emotional state-"

Rei throws her head back and howls, bending her knees and flipping through the air at Uri. Landing feet first on his chest, she grabs his collar and tears, ripping off his shirt before flipping back and landing in a crouch. Rising, slowly, she sniffs at the air, a rumble escaping her throat before she charges.

Holding up his hands, Uri's eyes glow and a wall of gold light appears, Rei slamming into it with a growl and snort.

"Uri's thrown up an AT Field!" Maya shouts, "He's blocked off Rei! As long as he keeps that up, she can't touch him!"

Rei's eyes glow, and she digs both hands into the field, Uri tilting his head as she growls and hisses.

"Rei's deployed her own AT Field!" Maya shouts, "She's eroding Uri's own!"

"She's not doing that," Ritsuko responds, hand on Maya's shoulder and leaning over to stare at her console, "She's breaking through it!"

With a roar, Rei breaks the field, tearing it open like tissue paper.

And sees the room empty and the hole in the wall where Uri managed to break through while she was busy busting his field.

"Aww," she says, and hops up and into the waiting ventilation duct.

...

On the screen, the back of the red giant opens, servos and gears whirring as the white rod shoots out of the brace around the gigantic cyborg's neck. And then it shakes with a squeak of its pilot, and spins

back in place. Followed by more questions over the speakers on when they're going to let her out.

"I'm *still* trying to figure out why Zwei isn't letting Miss Harasima go," Kyoko sighs, tapping her fingers on the conference table, "My guess is that Zwei either believes she is Asuka due to the similar personality, or he wishes to mate with her."

Across the table from her, Ritsuko and Yui both suck their teeth.

"I'm going to hope for the former," Yui says, "And maybe have a large hose ready if it's the latter. Do we know *what* caused this?"

Kyoko sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

"From what I can tell," she explains, "The attack of the Angel interacted with the AT Fields of the Evangelions, which caused them to...well...behave differently."

"Uri exited the Evangelion as soon as it was obvious the Angel was gone, and exiled himself to the detox facilities," Ritsuko adds, "So did Rei. If you can project an AT Field, apparently it affects you."

Yui nods.

"Unit-00?"

"Has been attempting to hack the internet servers of the MAGI to download *all* the porn she can find," Ritsuko says, sipping her coffee, "The Ree are redirecting her, and I had Maya upload her own porn collection to start her off slow."

Yui nods. Tilts her head, narrows her eyes, but nods.

"I...see," she says, "And Ichi?"

A hologram comes up as the conference table glows, revealing a wireframe image of the Mark-01. And it centers, shifts and zooms to a small dot, positioned in the lower abdomen.

"It's been growing at a steady rate since the attack," Ritsuko explains, several images of the mass at different sized appearing, "It was, at first, the size of a pinhead. It's currently as large as a bowling ball."

Yui's jaw opens and closes, working out the words.

"How?" she asks, "*Who?* Is it...is it Shinji?"

"What."

The two scientists turn to Kyoko, who slowly rubs the bridge of her nose and snaps off her glasses, rubbing her eyes.

"No," she says, "No no no. God no. You honestly don't believe the Mark-01 is *pregnant*. Do you?"

She slides her glasses back on, and stares at them. And sighs, shoulders slumping.

"Yes. Yes, you do."

...

The entry plug slides back out. Then the back of Zwei's neck shudders again, and the spins back in. The cage goes silent once again, followed by the steady crackle of the speakers on the Evangelion's neck.

"*H-hello? Can s-someone let me out?"*

...

Knees pumping, Uri runs, pulling on the t-shirt as he runs out and into the hallway. Bare feet on the metal floors, he runs in swift strides, sharp breaths as he runs from the fate he escaped from. He knows he is in the lower levels of NERV, so he needs to find an elevator. Or a lift. Or stairs. And he needs to escape.

Or at least, try to, before he turns the corner and slams into a rather surprised Shinji, sending them both tumbling down in a mess of arms, legs, and swears, rolling to a stop in front of Mari.

"Huh," she says, adjusting her glasses, "Two sweaty eva pilots rolling around on the floor. Someone could make a fan comic out of that."

Uri and Shinji glance at each other, and Shinji rolls off Uri, both sitting up and then standing, making a point to not touch. Clearing his throat, Shinji scratches the back of his head, and looks his girlfriend's brother up and down, as Mari smirks. Hands on her hips, dressed in her plugsuit, she looks up as something moves overhead.

"Is that Rei?" Shinji asks, "'Cause I came down here to check up on

Rei." He glances at Uri. "Was Rei in there with you?"

Uri shudders.

"Ah, right," Mari says, "Doctor Sohryu did say that the Angel was affecting the Evas and the Nephilim. So I guess since Uri was feeling a bit hot under the collar..."

More clattering in the ductwork above. More giggling.

"Oh dear," Shinji says, "That can't be good."

"Ayanami," Uri says, eyes following the sounds of the gigling, "Ayanami is...different. She stated she wished to..."

He shudders. Again. And then twitches, turning from Mari to Shinji. Mari frowns. Shinji's eyes go wide.

"O...kay," Shinji says, "Let's get you somewhere safe, Uri."

"I am an Angel, Ikari," Uri snaps, "I am more than capable of protecting myself."

Shinji sighs. There's arrogantly self-assured and then there's stupid, and last he checked, Uri only ticked *one* of those boxes.

"Uri," Shinji says, grabbing Uri by the shoulders, "Rei is sex crazed, in the ductwork, and *trying to mate with you."*

"I will, however, welcome more protection," Uri responds, "Let's go."

...

The screen flashes, showing the sky immediately above Tokyo-3.

"Negative contact. No sign of the Angel," Makoto reports, voice a drone as he downs another sip of coffee, "Switching the camera cluster over to Sector 7."

The screen flashes, becoming a ground eye view of the city, the Tokyo-3 City Center building prominently arisen above the rest of the city. Leaning on his console, tapping a button on his mouse, he watches as the screen flickers again.

"Switching to Sector 9."

Now above the Tokyo-3 CC. And moving. Possibly attached to a bird or drone of some sort. Knowing the people who run Project E, probably a cybernetic bird with laser eyes. Times like this, he misses Subdirector Sohryu. Or Langley, because he should really be Subdirector Langley. Because if anything, he fulfilled an important role at NERV. He was the one who would look at the cybernetic, bluetooth controlled predator drone which was shaped like a seagull, and ask,

"*What does it do and why do we need this?"*

NERV has a lack of those people. There was the gun-ho love machine who ran the R&D department, Sheldon on Lunar, and now the Second Branch is being run by Professor Ikari and Kei Ayanami. He's hearing rumors of ghost children and howling, like the sane people were away for a few weeks and now the place is a haunted house.

"Hey," he says, "Maya?"

He glances to the side. Ibuki has her head leveled at her screen, eyes narrowed, staring at it as she denies Unit-00 its sweet, sweet porn.

"Never mind."

He taps up the the display, bringing up the internal cameras of the Evangelion cages. And tilts his head when the display for Cage 3 shows only darkness.

"Huh," he says, "That's weird. We lost camera for Cage 3."

Next to him, the long haired bridge bunny mutters to himself, watching as Zwei once more denies the Cage staff access to the entry plug.

"Switch to another camera."

"Already did," Makoto responds, "Crap. Shigeru, are you doing anything?"

Aoba grunts, leaning back in his chair.

"Well, for the next few hours I'm gonna be watching Unit-02 play 'hide the Entry Plug.'"

"Great," Makoto says, leaning onto his console, "Can you go down to Cage 3 and find out what's up with the cameras? I'll watch Zwei, too."

Rolling his eyes at the mention of the red Eva's pet name, Aoba rises and walks out, whistling.

...

"No. No no no. No. No."

Kyoko rubs her temples, pacing in front of the conference table as Ritsuko and Yui frantically whisper, gesturing at the hologram of the Mark-01. Muttering to herself, she stops, glares at the two, and once more wishes Pieter were not en route to Berlin. He, at least, had something of a level head which he could force upon the heads of Project E.

"Why are we arguing this?" she asks, "There is a biological infection which has apparently *compromised* the Mark-01. We should be freezing it and trying to figure out if we've just compromised the single most powerful creature *on the planet."*

Yui raises a figure, wagging it as she rotates the hologram, continuing to examine it as Akagi continues taking notes.

"Ikari, are you listening to me-"

"I'm eccentric, not stupid," Yui says.

She doesn't snap, or raise her voice. She doesn't move her gaze from the hologram to Kyoko.

"Kyoko, I appreciate your expertise," Yui continues, "And I appreciate that you keep a level head where I tend to get lost in the details. But your specialty isn't the Mark-01. Mine is."

She sighs, straightening up, folding her arms and glaring at the hologram.

"And it isn't that simple," she says, "The Mark-01 isn't pregnant. It's something else. This isn't as simple as that."

"Then what is it?" Ritsuko asks.

"Something that we should have realized could happen the moment Ichi gained an S2 organ. The moment she started changing."

A sigh. Similar dots to the one on the abdomen appear all over the

hologram.

"The Mark-01 is *spreading."*

...

Shigeru Aoba, Lieutenant, 3rd down the line from the Tactical Operations Chief post, routinely asks himself why he stays with NERV. In the past few months, he has been forced to give Rei driving lessons, been attacked by angelic children, put into a fugue state by an Angel, and learned the girl that he was sort of but not obviously crushing on batted for the other team. The simple answer to his question, "Why am I still here?", has come down to,

"Here, I get to save the world."

The pay's not bad, either. These thoughts and more go through Aoba's head as he approaches the door to Cage 3, tapping the entrance button and lolling back and forth on his feet. Slowly, too slowly, the doors grind open, and Aoba looks up at the storage hangar that the Mark-01 is normally kept in. And expresses his thoughts as he is wont too.

"What. The. F-"

Something chitters overhead. Slowly walking in, unholstering his sidearm, Aoba looks up at the purple and green shape, covered from head to toe by purple to green vines, the fines spreading from the covered Mark-01 and wrapping around the catwalks, the ceiling, trees hanging upside down from the camera fixtures and roof of the hangar.

Flowers purple, green and gray line the catwalks, petals dancing in the silent wind. With every breath of the kudzu-covered giant, the flowers spread more, the trees growing an extra centimeter.

Cicadas chirp overhead, and something rustles in the trees. And Aoba absently, presses the side of his PDA, the red light flashing on the top, as several squat figures land in front of him in a crouch. Half his size, covered in purple and green armor which is lined and organic like an insect exoskeleton, they resemble the Mark-01 but with a larger head, proportioned like a toddler. And there are a dozen of them, standing on the catwalk in front of Aoba.

"Huh," he says, and waves, "Uh...hey?"

Throwing back their heads, the dozen Ichee howl, a sound a mixture of grunt and whistle, and Aoba takes the hint to run.

Chapter 110: Kokabel

5 hours earlier...

"Attention passengers, we will be landing at Berlin Brandenburg Airport shortly. Please make sure that your carry on luggage has been stowed and remember to taa~ake all your personal belongings with you. Have a nice day."

Asuka cocks an eyebrow, staring at the speaker above her. For a moment, she muses, she could have sworn that the pilot had the same lilt in his voice that she often hears from Rei or her sisters, which would most likely make him not someone you would give control of an airplane to.

Tapping her fingers on the keys of her laptop, Asuka looks across the cabin of the airplane, shifting in the business class seat before reaching down and unplugging the power cord from the socket next to her ankles. Next to her, there is a snort, and Pieter sits up, pulling the eye mask off his face and shoving it into his uniform jacket's pocket.

"Great! We're here!" he says, rolling his neck and clapping his hands.

They would talk for a while, then he would take a nap for twenty minutes. Then wake, and they would repeat. Which was itself remarkable. As he explained it, he was power napping to prevent himself from suffering from the effects of jet lag. Closing her laptop and putting it into her carry on, she sighs as the plane lands, unbuckling as it comes to a stop and walking behind her father out of the plane.

"Okay," he says, "So, the first people who we're going to meet, and I mean by the people who will be waiting for us right outside the gate, are Amelia and Toby. They're my closest friends and they were also Best Man and Maid of Honor at my mine and Kyoko's wedding. And also your godparents. And Mari's."

He snickers.

"Only thing I ever won over on Claire," he says, shifting the strap of his large carry on bag, a green and black duffle with a red fig leaf, "So, you're about to get the biggest hug of your life. More than Ayanami's sister."

"R-really?"

"I told them that your mother and I were back together," Pieter responds with a grin, "Amelia *squealed.* In all honesty, when Kyoko and I broke up, Toby gave me a black eye, but that's neither here nor there. So, be prepared, because they've wanted to meet you for a long time."

Asuka allows herself a small smile. It is her first time coming back to Germany in a long time. And with her father, who she's only gotten to know in the past year, and with people she never even knew about. Smiling, adjusting the strap of her laptop bag, she walks out of the gate just as she hears the footsteps speeding towards her.

And her father was right.

It *was* the biggest hug she's ever gotten.

Chapter 79:

Kokabel

It is about the size of a soccer ball, floating off the ground as its metallic surface oscillates around the green light coming from the center eye. The ring, the bisecting, miniscule gap that cuts down its center, spins as it floating in front of the window, the green light dimming and brightening as the eye narrows and opens. But, the people walking by the electronics display give it little more than a passing glance, figuring it is simply an experimental drone, most likely made by those crackpots at NERV.

The green light twitches, running over the large screen plasma televisions in the window display, watching the images of people moving, of action, or romance. It comes, swiftly, after hours of watching, to the conclusion that there are people within the screen, trapped by the screen. And, therefor, since imprisonment is the worst offense it can think of, they must be free.

The green light flashes, and the screens in the display sparkle, crack, and shut down. Tilting slightly, the sphere wonders where they have gone. Has it killed them? Was the price of freedom too high?

"Oo! What's that?"

The sphere turns, green eye focused on the voice. Lowering, it comes face to face with a small, female human, pre-adolescent, yellow-red hair and healthy, blue eyes. The girl, dressed in a school uniform with a blue blazer, smiles widely as the sphere rotates and tilts.

"*Hello,"* it says, "*What are you?"*

"I'm Katie!" the girl says, holding her book bag in front of her, showing none of the trepidation the woman behind her, genetically parental, yellow hair, blue eyes, slightly underweight and high blood pressure, does, "Are you from the underground labs?"

"*Yes I am,"* the sphere responds, which is true, he does come from the underground labs because that's where he was last, visiting [TYPE]Zeruel, "*Yes I am. I came from there. [DESIGNATION]Katie?"*

"Designation?"

"I think he's asking if that's your name," the mother says, an uneasy, still nervous smile on her face, "You know, Daddy might know who built it. One of his coworkers might have made it."

"Oh. Okay," Katie says, and smiles, "Yes, my Designation's Katie! What's yours?"

The sphere tilts.

"*[DESIGNATION] Kokabel. I am Kokabel."*

"We were just going to visit my Dad! He works at NERV. Do you want to come with us?"

Kokabel tilts his sphere. Observations. He is dedicated to his observations. This is a way to gain greater insight.

"*Yes."*

...

"So, I don't think you were ever in my actual part of the Second Branch. Your Mom worked in the Project E labs, which are still the Second Branch, but a different part of the facility."

The floors tick down, minutes passing as Asuka fixes her carry on bag. They spent an hour with her father's friends, letting the wife, the

woman who according to her father set up her parents in the first place, fawn over her in a way she's quite sure she's *never* been before. She has to admit, she liked it. She doesn't think she's ever been compared with her mother and took it as a *compliment* before, and she notices how the smile hasn't quite left her face, yet.

"So, we're in the administrative parts," Pieter continues, lolling back and forth on his feet, "This is where I worked before I went to Japan. We're going to meet Professor Ikari here, and also Ayanami and Nagisa."

"I've m-met Professor Ikari," Asuka says, "We met in New Vegas."

"Nice guy," Pieter says nodding, "Little eccentric, but that's gotta be par for the course with the Ikaris."

They both share a chuckle, as the doors ring, and open, releasing them into a polished, white metal hallway leading down the corridor. Shifting her bag on her shoulder, she walks out, half a step behind her father as he adjusts the collar of his beige uniform, fixing the cufflinks of his white buttoned shirt and straightening the jacket. His freshly polished shoes click on the floor, his shoulders straightening and his lips drawing back into a smile as they approach the office at the end of the hallway.

Tapping the release button at the side of the door, Pieter straightens up, hands clasped behind him, a symbol of calm, authority, and respect. And tries very hard to keep that facade up as the chair in front of Katsuhito Ikari turns, and Pieter locks eyes with Lorenz Kihl.

...

"*What is that?"*

"That's a door."

"*What is that?"*

"That's a light."

"*What is that on your feet?"*

"Those are shoes!"

The silver sphere pauses, making a questioning noise, and continues

turning, directing the green light of his eye at other objects. Walking down the hallway alongside her new friend, Katie giggles, as her mother trails behind them both. Which is when a door to the side opens, and the sphere turns, green eye locking with red eyes. The blue haired teen in the NERV uniform tilts her head, staring at the sphere.

"*What are you?"*

She blinks, takes out her PDA, and holds it out at the sphere.

"Very odd," Kei says, "The...hm. Well."

Kokabel tilts side to side, bobbing up and down.

"*What is that? Oh! It has numbers on it!"*

The sphere floats closer, orbiting around Kei, the light from it dimming and brightening, an action similar to an eye widening and narrowing.

"*What is that?"*

"It's a PDA," Kei says, and shakes her head, "Hm...you're right. No signal at all from it. It's not responding to any commands from my PDA."

The projector on the back of the PDA comes to life, and Kei rolls her eyes as the light from it forms into three figures. Two girls, and one boy, light streaming from her PDA to paint their images on the air. The youngest resembles a sullen, four year old version of her, complete with a four year old version of her-and by extension, her mother's- haircut. By contrast, the others, a girl with long hair, smiling genially at the world, and a young boy who for some reason is wearing glasses, blend elements of Kaworu into them.

"*Uh huh!"* the long haired girl says, "*He's definitely not a machine! So he has to be an Angel!"*

"*That's stupid,*" the sullen girl, who for some reason now insists on calling herself Almacia, says, "*It is obviously not an Angel. It has no offensive capabilities and is certainly not capable of leveling the city."*

"*Perhaps it intends to infiltrate the center of NERV and detonate?"* the boy asks.

"Don't. Give it. Ideas," Kei says, and sighs, "I'm handling this. Why

don't you go to the daycare and-"

Kokabel hovers over, tilting as it sees the holograms of the children.

"*What are you?"*

...

"Why didn't we know?"

The door of the office is closed, and only the two are inside. Asuka is off finding Kei, and the...surprise...is not there for right now. If anything, Pieter was surprised by how easily Katsuhito dismissed him. No threats. No yelling. It was like Ikari just told Kihl to *go to his room.*

"Because if I told my daughter," Katsuhito says, sitting back in his chair and glancing up from the paperwork on his monitor, "Lorenz would be dead roughly fifteen minutes later and I would have to answer a lot of very uncomfortable questions."

Muttering to himself, the old man bites down on the lollipop in his mouth.

"Still," Pieter starts, and rolls his eyes when Katsuhito once more fixes him with a glare.

"What would you have me do, Langley?" Katsuhito asks, "Smother an old man in his sleep? He is a monster, yes, but he is also an old man. I am many things, Langley, and I have been party unintended to disasters and horrors, but I am not a murderer."

"But he *is.*"

"And for that I have stripped him of authority, of his place on the Council and have restricted him to places *I can watch him at all times.* I will keep my enemy *very* close. I will not risk contingency plans he has set up in case of his death because we want well-deserved vengeance."

A sigh, and Katsuhito rubs the bridge of his nose, looking up at Pieter, who stands ramrod straight. A predictable thing about the man, too. Even if he doesn't actually *respect* you, he still shows the illusion of respect.

"As well, there is Nagisa," Katsuhito continues, "He has taken Kihl's place on the Council, and thinks of Kihl as his father. I will not risk

alienating Nagisa over revenge or blood. Neither will you. Sit."

Pieter does, shaking his head.

"Yes?" Katsuhito asks, "You have a question?"

"I know about Terminal Dogma," Pieter says, "I presume you're reading me into more things, but I think I might already know the whole picture."

A small smirk cracks the corner of Katsuhito's mouth, as he folds his hands in front of him.

"Oh no, Langley. The rabbit hole goes deeper than just Heaven's Gate."

...

One of the regrets of not joining the Eva program until a few months ago is that, while she recognizes the science behind it, she doesn't recognize as many of the people. Asuka doesn't know who the old man with the visor is, but he knows that her father doesn't like him. Given, her father is a...questionable...judge of character, judging from his two ex-wives, but she doesn't think he ever slept with the old man. She thinks.

Adjusting the strap of her carry-on, she considers taking out her PDA, accessing the Berlin MAGI, and finding where Kei is, but she should probably get network access privileges before she does that. That would be rude.

A small whisper. A giggle. She turns, towards the empty hallway, and shrugs.

The lights flicker. She looks up at the florescent bulbs, shrugs, and opens up her bag, looking in it for her PDA. Instead, she finds a ball curled up inside it, shivering, covered in a layer of bee-fur.

"Lilly?"

38!

The elevator doors in front of her open, and she looks up to find Kaworu standing across from her.

"Miss Sohryu?" Kaworu asks, "When did you arrive?"

"J-just today," she says, smiling, "Um..."

The black ball rises out of her bag, spotting Kaworu and hovering over to him.

:D!

"Um...hello," Kaworu says, tilting his head as the ball orbits him, "Odd. Second one who did this. Is...um...Lilly, right? We've met...before."

"She...um, she's a little freaked out," Asuka says, shrugging as Lilly rests on Kaworu's shoulder, "We...um...I think she stowed away in my carry on bag, and I think she woke up w-when we met Professor Ikari and his guest."

Kaworu nods, patting Lilly on the top.

"Are you looking for Kei?" he asks, Asuka nodding in response, "Good. Well, I'm meeting her in the staff kitchen. Would you like to come with me?"

Asuka nods, and walks into the elevator, taking out her PDA. Glancing at it, finding it rebooting, she shrugs and pockets it as the doors close.

The fact of the matter is, Kaworu Nagisa is her brother's brother. So technically, as Uri is her brother, Kaworu would also be her brother, or at very least a sort of half brother or step brother. Possibly, because she's never been very clear on it. Then again, Asuka has become used to having lots of identical, somewhat related people around her, especially since people assumed she and Uri were non-identical twins after he was adopted.

"Excuse me," Asuka says, "But...um...are we related?"

Kaworu cocks an eyebrow, screws his face in concentration, and shakes his head.

"I don't believe so." He shrugs. "Then again, Uri and I are differentiated clones with some different added in genetic differentiation, so I'm not sure."

Asuka nods.

"Uri's an Angel, now," Asuka says.

"Oh? I'm not," Kaworu says, coughing into his hand.

He sways back and forth, lolling on his feet. Asuka pays it no mind, although a small part of her mind wants her to ask him to backpedal harder, for some reason. Probably her snarky parts. She doesn't indulge them very much.

"So," he says, "How is Uri? He is getting along well?"

Asuka nods, smiling.

"As a Nephilim, it is somewhat scary," he continues, "To think that a single event, a single quirk, and they could become something...more. An Angel, a monster."

He glances over to Asuka.

"I hope he's getting along fine," he says, "And not having any...homicidal instincts."

"Oh, h-he's fine," Asuka says, "He only wants to throttle Shinji."

More floors pass. Kaworu cocks an eyebrow.

"They...don't get along well."

..

"What the Hell?"

The room is white, sterile. Par for the course at NERV-2, but it had to be acknowledged that the room is sterile *for* NERV-2. White, with only the blinking of the monitors on the wall to give it color against the red sheen painting the walls from the device at the center.

"I told you the rabbit hole goes deep," Katsuhito says, sucking the lollipop as he walks past Pieter, "Excuse him if he's quiet, Langley, but our guest has never been the most vocal with anyone outside of Nagisa."

"Does Kihl know about this?"

"Most likely, but this came here during his disabled period. We don't know if he knows, but it's always safe to assume that he knows."

The main feature at the center of the room is a cylinder, filled with yellow liquid. And at the center of the cylinder floats a red sphere,

smooth and fist sized, that glows steadily with its own inner light. Katsuhito strokes his chin. It wasn't that shape *last time* he was here.

"In any case, since you are the new Director, it makes sense that you know," Katsuhito continues, "Langley, this is Zeruel."

...

The lift speeds up, the transparent glass walls of the lift shifting from the metal of the elevator shaft to the metallic criss cross of the lift leading from the Evangelion Cages. Standing next to Kaworu, Asuka watches, as the mesh gives away to the steady progression of catwalks, and finally to the indigo figure standing in the cage.

"We just repainted it," Kaworu says.

The figure is thin, lithe, and humanoid, like any Evangelion. The lines of its dark blue armor are gold and white, a gold band forming a belt around the thin waist of the giant. The head is adorned in a demonic mask similar to the Mark-01's, two horns protruding from the nose, in front of a golden red visor that covers the eyes.

Asuka wonders what sort of creature is in the Core of this beast. A faithful friend, like Zwei? A noble warrior, like Go-kun? An innocent, like Ichi?

Is it possible she's getting to *used* to this? Used to the idea of idle chatter with something that can depopulate a continent?

"Anyway," Kaworu says, as the doors open, "This is my stop. The lift will take you to Kei's floor."

He smiles, nodding, and exits without another word. The doors close and the lift continues onward, past the cavern that holds the Mark-06, into the higher levels of the base. He seemed upset, she muses. Like his smile wasn't all there. It reminds her of Mother, before they reconciled, and for Mother it wasn't that she was angry, just...not good at sharing what was wrong.

The doors open, breaking her concentration, revealing a long metal hallway with flickering lights.

Shifting her bag on her shoulder, she enters the hallway, walking down it. The lights keep flickering, a crackle coming over the

speakers, and she feels...a chill. Like something crawling up her back. Against her better judgement, she turns, just as a light flickers on from an overhead projector and turns into a half dozen faces which resemble Rei's, or Kei's, or Shinji's.

"*Hi, Aunt Asuka!"* they giggle, "*You have to come play with us! For ever and ever and ever-*"

"She can't play with you now. How about later, after your lessons?"

"*kay.*"

And without another word, the ghost children disappear. Slowly, Asuka turns, seeing Kei standing in the hallway, with a pained look and a smile on her face.

"Um...when did NERV become a haunted house?"

"Long story," Kei responds, "Tea?"

...

"Well, that's not good."

The Big Screen of the Second Branch CinC hovers over the recessed banks of computers, technicians counting off numbers as the images play. Ikari sits at the raised chair at the center of the circular control room, hands folded in front of his mouth as his eyes work over the details of Anael's...

Attack? No, that implies harmful intent. What he is watching is hardly an attack. Even a wild animal is capable of more malicious intent than this Angel is bringing to bear.

"It's like a child," he says. Next to him, Pieter turns to him, taking his eyes off the screen.

"Pardon?"

"The Angel," he says, "Kaworu explained these kinds to me. They're curious, not malicious. The opposite of the Cherubim or the other angels. A highly curious, suggestive, and focused entity which is searching for something."

"But what?" Pieter asks, turning back to the screen.

And coming face to face with a floating metal ball, which turns to him and narrows its green eye.

"*Don't know what. But searching. Anael needs to search. Needs to find. What is it searching for?*"

On reflex, Pieter pulls out his gun, instincts taking over and telling him this is a *very bad thing.* Pulling the gun up, the barrel centers on the eye of the sphere in front of him. Green light plays over it, the gun glowing, and piece by piece it falls onto the floor. The technicians and bridge officers of the Second Branch have noticed the intruder by this point, weapons aimed at the sphere as it bobs up and down, narrowing the eye, the iris at the front of the creature closing to pencil width.

And the floor begins to shake, as Kokabel rotates and shines a thin beam of light towards the ceiling.

"*It is time.*"

...

The red ring rises over the sky, molten ground beneath. The Seed cracked against the world. The Mother rises from Her shell, the bulbous, spongy form rippling with every step, a giant striding the liquid earth.

Nine points of light surround Her, hovering above Her head like a halo, the seven red lights upon Her white face searching the world. Her motions are light despite the echoing rumble of Her footfalls, Her steps more the hops of an excited child than the strides of a newly born god.

The eight wings of light stretch out in the distance. A roar of sound, a roar of power, and the Giant of Light arises, haloed by lights of his own, fifteen in number.

The Children of the Mother see them. Equals. Opposites. Different from them and yet the same. They recognize them as Creations of a Creator, progeny of a Progenitor. Her kin fly off from Mother, taking shape, taking form. They are Opposites. They are Different. They are Enemy. That they see as they advance, roaring and spitting, burning ground sky and flesh before them.

She is the last to advance. Her place is by Mother's side, after all, but still, Mother tells her to engage the Other, to defend her. And she does.

And she advances, taking Form much like Mother, a shape of flesh and liquid, two wings rising from her back as her eyes shift to the front of her face. She can see her kin fighting, dying, and being reborn before Mother and fighting once more, attacking the Other with forms of knives, with forms of fire and spheres of crimson light, the most powerful of them locked in battle with a black shape of tendrils and crimson light.

And she finds her opponent. A form, shaped like the Giant of Light, only made of shadows as well. Four eyes in a diamond configuration upon his brow, six white wings unfurled from his back.

Who are you?** He asks, the light of his soul reflecting off of hers, raising an arm, the bulb at the end shifting and becoming a three fingers hand, **Are you of the Other?

Yes,** she responds, **You are of the Other?

*The head of the shadow formed opposite tilts. He considers her words. **Other**, they call their respective creators. They are both **Other** to their opposite. But that is not an adequate name. They need a better name. A name they can refer to their Self as.*

***What is He?** She asks, pointing to the Giant of Light.*

[He Who Is Father]**, Her opposite responds, and points to Mother, as Her skin begins to harden light armor, **And who is She?

*[**She Who Is Mother**], She responds, **That is their names, then? Father and Mother? And what of us?***

***Us?** He asks.*

What is your name?** She asks, the golden light pulsing against his, **Do you have a name?

I am [WILL]. I am the [WILL] of God. I am [WILL]. What is your name?

In the distance, the many legged giant falls once again, long legs splayed outward as the one of her kin smothers him beneath her many arms.

***I would like to know your name**, He says, his own Light pushing against hers. Against the force of his own, her own goes silent.*

She blinks her glowing eyes. Flesh parts beneath her eyes, an appendage formed within the cavity that now exists within the lower half of her head.

Tongue clicks against roof, lips parted, and sound is created, a whisper against the war around them.

"Tab. Iss."

You are Tab Iss?

She shakes her head, points to him. Tilting his head at her, a small realization and he backs away, his own barrier separating from hers.

I am Tab Iss? *He says, and nods, two eyes flanking the sides of his head tilting up as he nods,* ***Yes. But what is your name?***

She tilts her head. What an odd creature, she muses.

I am

"Kei?"

Kei blinks, and turns. Asuka smiles back, as the elevator rings.

"Is...um, is something wrong? You s-sort of zoned out there."

...

In the darkness beneath Berlin, green eyes open. One by one, they open, glowing in the earth and the dirt, and they begin to rise.

...

"Anyway," Kei continues, "If I could get a look at the...Omnitool, was it? If I could get a look at it, it could make my own research go a lot smoother."

The door opens with a whistling sound, revealing the white tiled room ahead of them, Asuka looking around at the sheer size of it. She didn't have this much space to work with back in Berlin, but she was rarely, if ever, on base back when she lived with Mother.

"So," Kei says, "This is the kitchen."

The kitchen itself is well arranged. There are several long preparation tables, a wide, double door fridge, several stoves, ovens, and

microwaves, and a twelve inch tall version of Asuka with dark blue hair cutting vegetables and wait.

Kei clears her throat. The foot tall doll looks up, the knife still a blur as it reduces a cucumber to a thin line of slices. The head turns one hundred and eighty degrees to look at Kei and Asuka, red eyes glowing.

"Oh, hello Mother!" she says in a high pitched, cheerful voice, the rest of the body- which is holding a rather sharp knife- turning to match with the head, "Hello! You must be Miss Asuka! I hope you don't mind, but the other Lil'Rei and Lil'Kei dolls didn't match with my ego-image of my hair, so I modified one of the dolls based on you!"

The doll hops off the stool it was standing on, skipping over to the two. Kei does not visibly react, walking past the animated miniature Asuka and to the fridge, taking out a can of milk tea and a bottle of soda.

"Um," Asuka says, glancing between Kei and the doll, "Well. So. What's your name?"

"I'm 05-EF E5," the doll says, clasping both hands in front of her, one of which still holds the knife, "You can call me 05-EF, for short."

Asuka cocks an eyebrow, looking at the miniature version of herself in front of her. She would be justified in freaking out, but she remembers Shinji talking about something like this happening during the dream state everyone was in for seven weeks.

"So," Asuka says, and pauses, "Well."

At least this one changed the hair color. And eye color. Otherwise, it would be looking at a small, nephilim version of herself, and that would be odd. And she's reasonably sure that if she became a nephilim and not Shinji, things would have been odd. And Misato would possibly have needed to repair walls.

"So w-wait, my dolls come with red eyes?"

"I modified it," the little girl responds, "It gives me night vision and helps me let people know where I am if I get lost. I also modified this model to be able to remote interface with appliances via a bluetooth modification, so I can help out in the kitchen and with cleaning!"

Asuka nods. That does sound like the modifications she did to that

Aibo, so Zwei could try out having an Avatar body. She wouldn't be surprised if someone read her notes.

"That's very clever," she says, "I'm i-impressed."

The doll smiles, clapping her hands together, and takes Asuka's hand in her own.

"Thank you very much," she says, "You're really, really nice! So why don't I show you your room and I'll help you clean it? It's right this way!"

And she walks out, pulling Asuka along with her. Leaving Kei in the kitchen, smiling to herself as she pops the seal on her can and takes a sip. This vacation is already off to a good start.

...

Deep beneath, green eyes open. Deep beneath, the metal spheres reignite the light that defines ***I***.

One by one, they rise, phasing through the dirt and metal, the bones and dust of ages.

...

The whirring gives him away. Kaworu tilts his head from the platform overlooking the Mark-06 to find the old man approaching. Even with all the hate that everyone else must feel for him- justifiably so, given what he attempted- Kaworu cannot bring himself to hate him. Even for the evil, misguided, horrific things he has attempted and has done, this man is still the closest thing he has to a father.

"Kaworu," Kihl says, walking up next to him, leaning on his cane, "You seem troubled."

Kaworu grunts an acknowledgement, staring at the Evangelion. His other half. He still has not told Kei everything. He should, one of these days.

"I am," he says, "How are you, Kihl?"

The cyborg shrugs, smiling. It is not a pleasant sight. He leans on the

cane, hand clasped around the red gem built into the head of the walking stick.

"I manage," he responds, "I have no illusions I will be skipping through fields of flowers. I am aware whatever has revived me is but a brief reprieve. But you have much time ahead of you. And I see you soured towards the world. I am curious why."

...

They rise, through metal and dirt, through armor and air. Throughout Berlin, the silver spheres rise, ghostlike through the ground as the alarms begin blaring, splitting the air with the same siren call that sounded during the day the Cherubim attacked. Like balloons of tin and green, they rise into the air, past the tallest buildings, hovering above the city itself.

Each chatters as it rises, each speaking in squeaks and chirps, a language of the other spheres, a language of pure information and input.

As the light that defines ***I*** glows around it, the cloud coalesces and takes shape, forming a funnel of silver and green, directing a beam of emerald light skyward as the doors to the domed hangar open and Pieter and Ikari run out.

"Intersting," Katsuhito says, "It appears to be comprised of thousands of the spheres, like..."

"Like a tornado made of bowling balls," Pieter adds.

The funnel becomes a line, then wraps around itself, emerald lights dancing in the sky and forming into a sphere. Lights dim on the outside of the sphere, becoming a shell of silver as the lights at the center ignite and expand, becoming an unbroken circle of green.

It rotates and oscillates, pulsing green into the sky, parting clouds into and clearing the sky. The spheres dance once more, becoming a ring orbiting a spear of silver, blossoming at the end to release a thin beam skyward.

Once more the spheres dance. They become shifting walls, reflecting the light inward, a dancing fleet of plates surrounding a pulsing green sun. Energy becomes sound, light transmitted into radio waves as

every cell phone, television, radio and computer in Berlin screams with static, and as one, does the voice begin to sing.

"On this Base Earth grew a tree,

A tree of Life, grown tall and free

Upon its branches in radiant white,

Grew I, and I, as is my right,

Declared my ADAM-given selfhood might,

In starlight bathed and silver light.

And spheres of platinum and cerulean eyes,

Were the body I wore as I through the sky,

Raised my majesty to heavens high.

I viewed this Base Earth from above,

To watch the stars with awe and love,

And kith and kin in wondrous awe,

Gazed and in my passing gave a roar,

"Beware! Beware! His flashing light,

Build 'pon the world's glorious night,

And please He Who is Called 'I AM's sight."

The cloud once more becomes a funnel, the tip of it coalescing into a sphere made of spheres, several of them igniting in green light at the center in a gigantic replica of one of the silver and green spheres.

Which then turns to Pieter and Ikari.

"***What are you?"*** the voice booms.

The sphere lowers, floating before Ikari and Pieter. The green light narrows to a tight beam, centering on the two.

"Huh," Pieter says, "Um. I'm Pieter Langley, Director of NERV. This is Professor Ikari."

The sphere bobs up and down.

"***Yes.***"

The solid black sphere floats up next to Ikari, white shifting over the surface as Lilly trills, green light playing over it from the eye of Kokabel.

"***Yes. Leliel. New form. Interesting. Oh! And you.***"

The light moves past Lilly, towards Asuka and Kei. Asuka has the blue haired doll in her arms, staring at the gigantic Angel before them. Even thought she should be terrified of this alien, shifting form before her, she can't muster up fear for it. Instead, she just feels an intense curiosity. Well, that and Kei is next to her, and if they have to run she can definitely rely on her to get her to safety.

"Well," Kei says, waving at the sphere, which turns to her, "Hello. Let me introduce myself. I'm-"

"***Oh! I know who you are,***" Kokabel says, eye narrowing to a slit as it nods, "***Hello, Kei.***"